University of Alberta

The Trickster in Transition: Tomson Highway's Theatrical Adaptation of the Traditional Trickster Figure

by

Shawna Marie Cunningham

A thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts.

Department of Drama

Edmonton, Alberta

Fall 1995

National Library
of Canada

Acquisitions and
Bibliographic Services Branch

395 Wellington Street
Ottawa, Ontario
K1A 0N4

Bibliothèque nationale
du Canada

Direction des acquisitions et
des services bibliographiques

395, rue Wellington
Ottawa (Ontario)
K1A 0N4

Your file Votre référence

Our file Notre référence

THE AUTHOR HAS GRANTED AN IRREVOCABLE NON-EXCLUSIVE LICENCE ALLOWING THE NATIONAL LIBRARY OF CANADA TO REPRODUCE, LOAN, DISTRIBUTE OR SELL COPIES OF HIS/HER THESIS BY ANY MEANS AND IN ANY FORM OR FORMAT, MAKING THIS THESIS AVAILABLE TO INTERESTED PERSONS.

L'AUTEUR A ACCORDE UNE LICENCE IRREVOCABLE ET NON EXCLUSIVE PERMETTANT A LA BIBLIOTHEQUE NATIONALE DU CANADA DE REPRODUIRE, PRETER, DISTRIBUER OU VENDRE DES COPIES DE SA THESE DE QUELQUE MANIERE ET SOUS QUELQUE FORME QUE CE SOIT POUR METTRE DES EXEMPLAIRES DE CETTE THESE A LA DISPOSITION DES PERSONNE INTERESSEES.

THE AUTHOR RETAINS OWNERSHIP OF THE COPYRIGHT IN HIS/HER THESIS. NEITHER THE THESIS NOR SUBSTANTIAL EXTRACTS FROM IT MAY BE PRINTED OR OTHERWISE REPRODUCED WITHOUT HIS/HER PERMISSION.

L'AUTEUR CONSERVE LA PROPRIETE DU DROIT D'AUTEUR QUI PROTEGE SA THESE. NI LA THESE NI DES EXTRAITS SUBSTANTIELS DE CELLE-CI NE DOIVENT ETRE IMPRIMES OU AUTREMENT REPRODUITS SANS SON AUTORISATION.

ISBN 0-612-06334-8

Canada

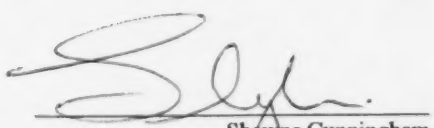
UNIVERSITY OF ALBERTA

LIBRARY RELEASE FORM

NAME OF AUTHOR:	**Shawna Marie Cunningham**
TITLE OF THESIS:	**The Trickster in Transition: Tomson Highway's Theatrical Adaptation of the Traditional Trickster Figure**
DEGREE:	**Master of Arts**
YEAR THIS DEGREE GRANTED:	**1995**

Permission is hereby granted to THE UNIVERSITY OF ALBERTA Library to reproduce single copies of this thesis and to lend or sell such copies for private, scholarly, or scientific research purposes only.

The author reserves all other publication and other rights in association with the copyright in the thesis, and except as hereinbefore provided, neither the thesis nor any substantial portion thereof may be printed or otherwise reproduced in any material form whatever without the author's prior written permission.



Shawna Cunningham

171 Midland Place SE
Calgary, Alberta
T2X 1N1

DATE: August 9, 1995

University of Alberta

Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research

The undersigned certify that they have read, and recommend to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research for acceptance, a thesis entitled, **The Trickster in Transition: Tomson Highway's Theatrical Adaptation of the Traditional Trickster Figure,** submitted by **Shawna Marie Cunningham** in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts.

James H. McPeague

Supervisor
Dr. James McPeague

James V. DeFelice

Supervisory Committee Member
Dr. James DeFelice

Wapashkwan

Supervisory Committee Member
Dr. Carl Urion

Aug. 9, 1995

Date of Approval

DEDICATION

I would like to dedicate this thesis to *Nôhkom* (my Grandmother), Maria Cunningham, who was born to a large Metis family in St. Albert in 1906, has seen Halley's comet twice, and gave birth to 10 children. *Ay-ay* (thank-you) for sharing your time, your stories, and your wisdom with me on Saturday afternoons. Ekosi! ... Love Shawna.

ABSTRACT

This thesis study examines the theatrical contribution, aesthetic principles, and use of oral mythology by Native Canadian playwright, Tomson Highway. Highway, to date, has published two plays: *The Rez Sisters*, and *Dry Lips Oughta Move to Kapuskasing*. The thesis provides an in depth analysis of Highway's theatrical aesthetic and relates this aesthetic to other prominent Native visual artists and writers. This portion of the thesis serves as a means to address the relationship between Native culture and spirituality and the development of a contemporary aesthetic in Native art and the theoretical criticism thereof. As a contemporary Native artist, Highway is inspired by the mythology of his people and employs the use of the mythical trickster figure, *Nanabush*, in his scripts. This study also examines Highway's theatrical adaptations of this trickster figure in comparison to the trickster as it exists in the traditional oral literature. This examination is then related to audience response, cultural protocol concerning traditional mythology, and the cultural implications of his use and adaptation of the trickster.

ACKNOWEDGMENTS

Many individuals have influenced, inspired, and supported me throughout my academic career. Firstly, I would like to acknowledge a list of professors that have inspired me to further explore the philosophical principles of Native culture, Native literature and mythology, and the theatre. This list includes: Thomas King, Leroy Little Bear, Dr. Chez Skinner, Terry Bennett, Richard Epp, Dr. Carl Hare, Dr. Alex Hawkins, Dr. James DeFelice, Dr. Carl Urion, Jan Selman, Jace Van Der Veen, and most importantly, my supervisor, Dr. Jim McTeague. I would also like to thank some of my fellow graduate students who were very supportive and influential: Sandra Nicholls, Ken Williams, Vern Thiessen, Will Zakowski, Steve Olson, Diane Hendrickson, Wendy Philpott, and most importantly, Deborah Tihanyi.

I would also like to acknowledge Floyd Favel and Tomson Highway for sharing their time, their work, and their thoughts on Native theatre. A special thanks to the members of the U of A Aboriginal Student Council from 1991 / 1992 who offered a great deal of support and friendship.

Finally, thank-you to all of my family and special friends for all their support and encouragement. A special thanks to Karen and Jo Davidson for their much appreciated assistance.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction 1

Chapter One 12
The Aesthetic Principles of Tomson Highway

Chapter Two 44
Trickster Discourse: A Survey of the Analytical Discourse on the Traditional Trickster Figure

Chapter Three 67
An Examination of Highway's Theatrical Adaptation of the Trickster

Conclusion 89

A Note on the Bibliography 93

Bibliography 94

Appendices

Appendix I 101
Personal Interview with Tomson Highway. October 31, 1994.

Appendix II 106
Special Presentation: Tomson Highway, Mount Royal College October 31, 1994.

Appendix III 107
Special Presentation: Tomson Highway, University of Calgary, February 23, 1993.

DEDICATION

I would like to dedicate this thesis to *Nôhkom* (my Grandmother), Maria Cunningham, who was born to a large Metis family in St. Albert in 1906, has seen Halley's comet twice, and gave birth to 10 children. *Ay-ay* (thank-you) for sharing your time, your stories, and your wisdom with me on Saturday afternoons. Ekosi! ... Love Shawna.

THE TRICKSTER IN TRANSITION: Tomson Highway's Theatrical Adaptation of the Traditional Trickster Figure

INTRODUCTION

Contemporary Native theatre is derived from a unique historical foundation, a strong tradition of skilled storytelling, the preservation of ritual practices, and a new-found literate form of expression. The development of Native theatre seems a natural and enlightening progression of events which fuses the traditional storyteller to the visionary artist and projects the artistic vision into the theatre through performance, which formulates a means of cultural expression. In assessing Native theatre, a critic once remarked that with "the appearance of the contemporary Native playwrights, a new voice began to be heard, giving expression to a wide range of Native concerns and cultural concepts. Unfamiliar figures began to appear, gradually displacing the old stereotypes...." [1] This observation reflects the fact that Native and non-Native playwrights differ in their perspectives when writing about Native cultures and depicting Native experiences. Non-Native playwrights impose a Western world view on Native people and cultures and communicate the perspective of a cultural observer rather than a participator. In contemporary Canadian theatre, one example is George Ryga's play, *The Ecstasy of Rita Joe*. Ryga's play expresses a significant non-Native truth regarding an observation of the life of poverty-stricken, inner-city Native people during the late 60's, and, in this light, *The Ecstasy of Rita Joe* is a significant Canadian play about Native people. However, it does not employ a Native perspective, and unlike Native playwrights, it doesn't express and communicate a direct world view that signifies truth from within the Native cultural experience.

---

[1] Diane Debenham, "Native People in Contemporary Native Drama" Canadian Drama, 14•2 (1988), 137.

Canadian playwright, Tomson Highway, is without question one of the most important emerging theatre artists in Canada. As a Cree Indian from northern Manitoba, Highway has naturally textured his work with Native cultural concepts which are reflective of philosophies derived, in part, from oral tradition which is innate within the socio-cultural structure of Native communities. Highway has received both critical acclaim and commercial success for his two published plays titled, *The Rez Sisters* and *Dry Lips Oughta Move to Kapuskasing*. Through the production of his plays, he has opened the theatre door to the power, tenacity, and colorful beauty of Native people and provided audiences with a raw and unedited glimpse of the day-to-day life of a variety Native characters. The interaction between Highway's characters unveil the intricate relationships and pulsating, yet sometimes disturbing, life within a contemporary Native community. Unlike previous Canadian playwrights, Highway does not dwell on the attempt to define the identity of Native people in terms of their relationship to a dominant non-Native society, nor has he focused on the popular romantic cultural images of the past. Instead, he has depicted a vibrant contemporary Native community definable on its own terms and intimately connected to the spiritual world and the land base traditionally referred to as Turtle Island.

As a Native artist, Tomson Highway's contribution to theatre in Canada and his impact on the Canadian perspective of Native people might be compared to the impact Norval Morrisseau had in the development and perception of Native art in Canada throughout the late 1960's. In an analytical article on Highway's plays, Daniel David Moses remarked:

> Tomson Highway sees himself as a part of a second wave of Native artists, performers, and writers following up and expanding on the work that such painters as Norval Morrisseau and Daphine Odjig started more than a decade ago, the work of showing Canadians the spirit of the land they live in. [2]

Like Morrisseau, Highway has received artistic inspiration from the oral traditions of his people, and the influence of these traditions form the cornerstone of his theatre. In an article on Native mythology, Highway himself acknowledged Morrisseau's influence on the artistic development of Native art in Canada and related Morrisseau's impact to contemporary Native writers:

> The Indian painters made their first big statement in the early 1960's with the explosion onto the Canadian scene of such names as Norval Morrisseau, Daphne Odjig and others. This event - and particularly in the case of Morrisseau - marked the first time Indian people made available for public consumption their mythology, a mythology considered too sacred, by their own people, for this purpose and, in fact, so potent in its meaning that Christian missionaries did all they could to replace this mythology with their own. Twenty years later, it appears the writers are now finally ready to take the step taken earlier by the visual artists. [3]

---

[2] Daniel David Moses, "The Trickster Theatre of Tomson Highway" Canadian Fiction Magazine, 60 (Summer 1987), 85.

[3] Tomson Highway, "On Native Mythology" Theatrum, 6 (Spring 1987), 29.

Moreover, Highway, like Morrisseau, has also been the target of debate regarding both his interpretations, some might even claim distortions, of mythical figures as well as his traditional authority to share these sacred stories or figures with the general public. Although some critics from within the Native community have condemned Highway for his use or misuse of mythology, others have been adamant in defending him as they once did Morrisseau. In defense of Highway's work, a fellow Native artist made the following comment:

> In my interview we talked about the painful criticism he is experiencing as one who has chosen to stick his neck out to give a voice to the pain, the joy, the contradictions and the comedy of learning to live as an Indian in this day and in this place. I remember when Norval Morrisseau as a young artist was criticized by our people for presenting images of his visions and stories of the people to the public. [4]

Despite these debates, which will be covered in more detail in this study, Highway has provided an opportunity for Canadian audiences to acquire some degree of insight into selective aspects of Native culture.

The advent of Native theatre is a relatively contemporary phenomenon in Canadian culture. In attempting to explore the aesthetic qualities unique to Native theatre and dramatists like Tomson Highway, it is important to note that a clear and concise definition of Native theatre has yet to be presented and/or accepted by the Native and non-Native artistic community. In fact, the attempt to define Native art and Native artists has been the focus of many scholarly discussions and debates regarding Native visual art and Native literature. Not unexpectedly, these "definitive" scholarly debates have descended on contemporary Native theatre and are represented, most recently, by an onslaught of editorial correspondence featured in *The Drama Review* Spring 1993 and Spring 1994 issues.

In *The Drama Review* Spring 1992 issue, Jennifer Preston's featured article titled, "Weesageechak Begins to Dance: Native Earth Performing Arts Inc.," initiated a literary debate focusing on the definition of Native theatre. Preston's article presented a somewhat biased, yet historical account / celebration of the success of the Canadian Native theatre company. This article was followed by a strong opposing response published in the Spring 1993 TDR issue from Susan Bennett, an English professor at the University of Calgary. Bennett accused Preston, a non-Native, of encroaching on "dangerous" literary grounds for formulating a definition for what constitutes "success" in the genre of Native theatre. In addition, Bennett criticized Preston for lacking objectivity in her presentation of

---

[4] Brian Loucks, "Another Glimpse: Excerpts from a Conversation with Tomson Highway" Canadian Theatre Review, 68 (Fall 1991), 9.

Tomson Highway's/Native Earth's productions and referred to Preston's article as dangerous, for it publicly limits the definition of Native theatre in general. Bennett also deemed the editorial board of TDR to have been irresponsible and in violation of its editorial policy as the article was not "objective" in its presentation style. Bennett's response is summarized in the following statement: "Preston instead takes up the mainstream equation that Tomson Highway is NEPA [Native Earth Performing Arts], is Native theatre in Canada, is a success." [5] Of course, Bennett's response, in turn, provoked a chain of editorial letters published in TDR from the following individuals: Native actress- Doris Linklater (Spring 1993), TDR editor- Richard Schechner (Spring 1993), the co-editor of *Canadian Theatre Review* - Alan Filewood (Spring 1994), and the President of the Board of Directors for *Native Earth Performing Arts* - Bill Henderson (Spring 1993). Thus, the scholarly debate on defining Native art forms, which has been evoked in all mediums of Canadian Native art , rages on.

In response to the surge of Native theatre in Canada during the late 1980's and early 1990's, the Fall 1991 issue of *Canadian Theatre Review* was dedicated to Native theatre art and artists. In compiling this issue, the editorial board of CTR contracted Native actress/writer Monique Mojica to edit the publication. In approaching this project, the editorial board seemed to take into account the ongoing debate over "appropriation of voice" and, in avoidance of that debate, granted Mojica total control over compilation of this particular CTR issue. In fact, on behalf of the board, Alan Filewood, co-editor of CTR, stated that "We guaranteed to publish whatever she compiled without any intervention on our part." [6] Furthermore, in her introduction, Mojica stressed indigenous diversity and acknowledged that this cultural diversity has contributed to the difficulties associated with the attempt to clearly define Native theatre. Mojica contended that cultural diversity among contemporary Native people has made detailed definitive statements on Native theatre very difficult and limiting. In her introductory note, Mojica explained that,

> As Native artists, we are a diverse lot as varied in our cultural backgrounds as we are in our training and the styles in which we choose to work. Hopefully, no one who reads this journal cover to cover will be able to subsequently declare: "Ah ha! Now I know which cubby-hole to put Native theatre into - it's been defined for me." On the contrary, this issue seeks to highlight the rich texture of the diversity among Native theatre artists. [7]

In his introduction to *An Anthology of Canadian Native Fiction*, Thomas King, a Native author and professor at the University of Massachusetts, contended that Native literature is "literature produced by Natives." Although this definition was acceptable to King in a general sense, he, like

---

[5] Susan Bennett, "Subject to the Tourist Gaze: A response to Weesageechak Beings to Dance" The Drama Review, 37•1 (Spring 1993), 10.

[6] Alan Filewood, "Filewood Responds" The Drama Review, 38 (Spring 1994), 37.

[7] Monique Mojica, "Theatrical Diversity on Turtle Island: A Tool Towards the Healing" Canadian Theatre Review,. 68 (Fall 1991), 3.

Mojica, took into consideration the cultural diversity of Native people and cautioned that critics of Native literature should "resist the temptation of trying to define a Native." [8] On the application of the above definition of Native literature, King warned:

> This definition, however, makes a rather large assumption, a type of *dicto simpliciter*. It assumes that the matter of race imparts to the Native writer a tribal understanding of the universe, access to a distinct culture, and a literary perspective that is unattainable by non-Natives.[9]

In an article for *Theatrum* in 1987, Tomson Highway cautiously defined Native theatre in the following terms:

> 'Native Theatre' - for lack of a better terminology - has been around for only about ten years, if that. By 'Native theatre', I mean theatre that is written, performed, and produced by Native people themselves and theatre that speaks out on the culture and the lives of this country's Native people. [10]

Highway's definition for Native theatre is very similar to King's definition for Native literature. Therefore, this study will assume the definition that Native theatre is simply, "theatre created by Native theatre artists and dramatists." In reference to the term *Native*, the study will also take into account King's cautionary notation and the assumed "dicto-simpliciter" as defined by King in a previous passage. However, it is important to also note that, in Canada, the term *Native* is used collectively in reference to a culturally diverse indigenous population which includes treaty status and non-treaty status Indians, Metis, and Inuit people.

In studying the progressive development of contemporary Native theatre, it becomes evident, through the dramatic texts of Native playwrights like Tomson Highway *(The Rez Sisters, Dry Lips Oughta Move to Kapuskasing)*, John McLeod, *(Diary of a Crazy Boy)*, Daniel David Moses *(Coyote City)*, and Monique Mojica *(Princess Pocahontas and the Blue Spot)*, that rather than attempting to clearly define Native theatre, one might focus one's attention more easily by studying common aspects of Native theatre. In fact, Native theatre inspires the exploration and presentation of unique aesthetic qualities which are highly influenced by and exclusive to the Native cultural experience. These aesthetic qualities are generally derived from a combination of a distinct historical foundation, a strong tradition of storytelling, the preservation of oral tradition and ritual, and the accession of and exposure to a literate and somewhat Western structural form of expression. In commenting on Anishnabec (Objiway) visual art, Mary Southcott, an art historian, made the following statement:

---

[8] Thomas King, "Introduction: An Anthology of Contemporary Native Literature" Canadian Fiction Magazine 6 (1987), 5.

[9] Ibid., 4.

[10] Tomson Highway, "On Native Mythology" Theatrum, 6 (Spring 1987), 29.

> No great art has ever existed without a great philosophy or belief system to inspire it. The culture of the Anishnabec provides the ideal source for the Anishnabe artists. [11]

The inclusion of aspects of the oral traditions in contemporary art forms seems to be a practice common to many Native artists in various artistic mediums. Traditionally, specialized Native storytellers and elders were the primary communicators of the world view in accordance to Native people. The world view of Native people, which includes philosophy, spirituality, and social order, has been passed on, in part, through a system of oral tradition and recitation of myths and legends. Today, a great deal of contemporary Native artists have united their creations to the oral traditions of the people; in doing so, they continue to pass on the world view of their people through their art. In a sense, the inclusion of any aspect of oral tradition into an artistic creation presents an interesting relationship whereby the role of the contemporary artist can be linked to the role of the traditional storyteller. In fact, Thomas King noted that "in the development of a culturally expressive voice, Native writers have looked to oral literature for inspiration and direction." [12] As a contemporary Native playwright and artist, Tomson Highway has been profoundly influenced by the mythology of his people and has, on several occasions, re-iterated both its importance within Native culture as well as its creative potential and accessibility to Native artists. His incorporation of this mythology plays an integral role in aesthetic quality of his plays.

The Rez Sisters and *Dry Lips Oughta Move to Kapuskasing* are the first in a cycle of seven plays that Tomson Highway is planning to write about Wasaychigan Hill, a remote fictional Native reserve modeled after Manitoulin Island in Ontario. Highway has referred to this cycle of plays as the 'Rez' plays and has linked the plays together through community setting, characters, and the mythical trickster figure referred to in his scripts as *Nanabush*. In terms of critical success, Highway's two published plays have received both international and national acclaim.

The Rez Sisters, published by Fifth House Publishers in 1988, was actually written in 1985. The play was workshopped for the first time in February 1986 in conjunction with the *De-ba-jeh-mu-jig* Theatre Group on Manitoulin Island. There, the workshop production received little attention from the critics. However, when the play opened on November 26, 1986 at the Native Canadian Centre in Toronto, it received valuable critical acclaim which attracted national attention to both Highway and the Native theatre movement in general. In 1987, *The Rez Sisters* won the Dora Mavor Moore award for Outstanding New Canadian Play in the comedy / drama division. The play was also nominated in

---

[11] Mary Southcott, The Sound of the Drum, (Ontario: The Boston Mill Press, 1984), 82. [* Anishnabe is singlular, Anishnabec is plural for the Obijway.]

[12] Thomas King, "Introduction: An Anthology of Contemporary Native Literature" Canadian Fiction Magazine 6 (1987), 8.

1987 and named the runner-up for the Floyd S. Chalmers award as the Best Canadian Play. In addition, it was one of two plays selected to represent Canada at the1988 International Edinburgh Festival.

Highway's second published play, *Dry Lips Oughta Move to Kapuskasing*, stimulated even more critical acclaim then *The Rez Sisters*, but was also plagued by controversial responses from some Native women for what was termed "misogynist "content. [13] The play was written in 1988 and published by Fifth House Publishers in 1989. *Dry Lips Oughta Move to Kapuskasing* premiered on April 21, 1989 at Theatre Passe Muraille in Toronto. This first production was co-produced by Native Earth Performing Arts Inc. and was followed by prestigious critical acclaim both in the theatrical and literary communities. In 1989, *Dry Lips*, like *The Rez Sisters*, won the Dora Mavor Moore Award for Best New Play. In addition, *Dry Lips* won three other Dora Mavor Moore awards which included Best production, Best male Actor in a lead role (Graham Greene), and Best Female actor in a supporting role (Doris Linklater). On this night, it was observed that, "each announcement filled the auditorium with the melody of wolves as the tribe that is this city's native theatre community, howled its satisfaction." [14] Along with the Dora "sweep", *Dry Lips*, unlike *The Rez Sisters*, won the Floyd F. Chalmers award for Best Canadian Play in 1989. The play was also honored in September 1990 with a Toronto Arts Award in the performing arts category. [15] In October of 1990, the play was produced by the MTC Warehouse Theatre in Winnipeg. Following this acclaim, Native Earth Performing Arts was invited to remount *Dry Lips* at the Royal Alexandra Theatre in Ottawa. The play premiered on April 13, 1991.

Highway's other professional achievements are numerous in the theatrical community. In 1986, he became the Artistic Director of Native Earth Performing Arts, which was originally founded in 1982 and incorporated in 1983. [16] Highway was highly effective in his position with Native Earth Performing Arts and was instrumental in initiating and promoting new works by Native playwrights. In 1990, he founded and established an annual Native playwright's festival titled, *Weesageechak Begins to Dance*. At the end of the1992 season, Highway left his position as artistic director and left Native Earth Performing Arts Inc. "administratively sound and deficit free." [17] In addition to his duties as artistic director, Highway co-founded the *Committee to Re-establish the Trickster* in the summer of

---

[13] Gerald Hannon, "Tomson and the Trickster" Toronto Life, 25•4 (March 1991), 81.

[14] Ibid, 31.

[15] "Callwood, Moriyama Honored: Seven Others Also Win Toronto Arts Awards" Globe and Mail, (25 Sept 1990), C1.

[16] Native Earth Performing Arts: Bringing an Eloquent Native Voice to Canadian Theatre. (Brochure for 1990/91 NEPA Season).

[17] Prokosh, Kevin, "Highway Runs into Creative Traffic Jam" Winnipeg Free Press, (25 June 1992), C28.

1986 with fellow writers, Daniel David Moses and Lenore Keeshig Tobias. [18] Along with Native artists Makka Kleist, Doris Linklater, and Monique Mojica, Highway worked with Richard Pochinko and Ian Wallace of the Theatre Resource Centre in Toronto in 1986 in order to "provide Native Earth with tools with which to approach the traditional Native Trickster characters." [19] In recognition of his accomplished career, Highway was honored with the Order of Canada for arts and writing in January 1994. [20] During the Fall of 1994, Highway was appointed Writer in Residence at the University of Toronto. Highway's unpublished collaborated plays include: *Aria, The Sage, the Dancer and the Fool*, and *New Song, New Dance*. He is currently working on a musical theatre piece, which is the third play of the "Rez" cycle, titled, *Rose*.

Native writer and English professor, Thomas King, surmised that Highway's critical acclaim, beginning with the publication of *The Rez Sisters*, should be credited for the establishment of a national Native literary movement in Canada. King credited a group of three Native novelists - N. Scott Momaday *(House Made of Dawn)*, James Welsh *(Winter in the Blood)*, and Lesli Silko *(Ceremony)* - with initiating the Native literary movement in the United States. He contrasted the development of Canadian literature to that in the United States where the Native literary movement began with novelists rather than dramatists. King observed that, in Canada, unlike the States, Native drama has initiated the Native literary movement. Although King only produced speculative theory as to why this has occurred, he clearly credited Highway as the pivotal Native writer in Canadian literature. During the course of his interview, King made the following observation:

> Looking at oral literature, looking at more traditional forms of entertainment and ceremonial, I would have suspected that drama would have come first. I don't know why it didn't in the US, but it certainly didn't. For some reason, I think maybe it is the fact Highway is a playwright, and those plays got lots of attention when they came out, and ofcourse, you have a very strong Native playwrighting community in Ontario, and you also have one in Saskatoon, and one out in Vancouver. [21]

Highway' s influence on Native literature in general and Canadian theatre in particular has been clearly established. However, after reviewing the literary and production critiques of Highway's work, it is evident that his work has also evoked some negative responses from audiences and critics. Although *Dry Lips* received more critical acclaim then his first play, audiences, most importantly the female Native audience members, were not as eager to embrace *Dry Lips* as they were *The Rez Sisters*.

---

[18] M.T. Kelly, "The Trickster" This Magazine., 21•1 (March/ April 1987), 40.

[19] Cashman, Cheryl, "Toronto's Zanies" Canadian Theatre Review, 67 (Summer 1991), 22.

[20] "Order of Canada Honours Announced" Globe and Mail , 7 January 1994, A7.

[21] Hartmut Lutz, "Thomas King" Contemporary Challenges: Conversations with Canadian Native Authors, (Saskatoon: Fifth House Publishers, 1991), 109-110.

Negative responses to the productions of *Dry Lips* tended to focus primarily on the violent content of the play in relation to the portrayal of Native women.

Generally, non-Native theatrical and literary critics have a tendency to avoid delving into the gender controversy surrounding *Dry Lips* in any depth and often attribute any audience confusion to structural difficulties in the third act. There may be many reasons as to why some critics evade the feminist controversy surrounding *Dry Lips*. Firstly, Highway is one of few Native writers who has had a significant impact on Canadian theatre; therefore, there may exist a type of cautious approach to the critical analysis of his work. In addition, this caution may also reflect the fact that only a few select Canadian literary critics have the adequate experiential insight into the traditional knowledge derived from the exposure to and/or study of Native mythology and culture which forms the basis of Highway's performance texts. Therefore, some of the Native critics are more caustic and less enchanted by Highway than most of the non-Native critics. Secondly, given the metaphorical content of his plays, it becomes evident the Highway takes full advantage of theatrics, and the emotional impact of Highway's plays are realized more dynamically in the context of performance. Therefore, the theatrical criticism of Highway, unlike the literary criticism, reflects more emotional and less intellectual responses and analysis than published literary criticism.

In attempting to address the feminist controversy, literary critic, Anne Grant, was elusive as she speculated that "possibly, *Dry Lips* is better literature than *The Rez Sisters*, but it lacks the popular appeal and gusto of *The Rez Sisters*, and it often leaves the theatre goers and readers confused". [22] Another critic, Denis Johnston presented a somewhat different, yet still cautiously intellectual, supposition. Johnston praised Highway for his well developed plot and character structure in *The Rez Sisters* and criticized him for an underdeveloped plot and character structure in *Dry Lips*. Johnston noted that "in contrast to the life affirming impulse of *The Rez Sisters*, we find in *Dry Lips* a litany of disturbing and violent events, set within a thin frame of hopefulness which is ultimately unconvincing."[23] Both critics seem to avoid the deliberation behind the disturbances and confusion provoked by the play. Although these critical pieces are extremely valuable in their own right, one might note the difference in the approach taken by Native critic and writer, Marie Annharte Baker who stated:

> Our internalized racism and sexism seems to get financial rewards, literary or artistic awards. Current atttitudes held by men seem to check the power of Aboriginal women, and there are men who claim to be able to give back that power. Indeed some women look to the works of

---

[22] Agnes Grant, "Canadian Native Literature: The Drama of George Ryga and Tomson Highway" Australian/ Canadian Studies, 10-2 (1992), 44.

[23] Denis Johnston., Lines and Circles: The Rez Plays of Tomson Highway" Canadian Literature, 124-125 (Spring/Summer 1990), 260.

> Tomson Highway to educate the public about racism and sexism in a community in transition. However, *Dry Lips Oughta Move to Kapuskasing* silenced Aboriginal women, and I had to see it for myself. [24]

Speculative analysis and controversy over Highway's plays has raised literary discussions, especially within the Native community, concerning the appropriation and/or adaptation of traditional mythology by Native writers. This debate hits the heart of the different philosophical theories associated with theatre and art in general. In particular, a debate which raises questions regarding artistic responsibility versus the freedom of the artist. For the Native community, which still embraces the sense of communal existence, the Native artist/writer often faces the judgment of the Native community which may evaluate the acceptability of his/her work in relation to the representation of and impact on the community as a whole. In addition, the Native artist/writer may also face the principle of 'permission' and the right to speak the tribal truths of the people with respect to culture, ritual, and myth. It is at the centre of this controversy that one discovers Tomson Highway.

Because the trickster figure is central to Highway's plays and the presentation of this figure in a theatrical setting has emerged as the centre of the controversy surrounding his work, the relationship between this mythical figure as it appears and functions in the traditional mythology as compared to Highway's performance texts invites further contemplation. Therefore, this study examines both the aesthetic principles of Highway as well as his theatrical adaptation of the trickster figure from oral literature to drama. An examination of the function and presentation of Highway's trickster can provide deeper insight into firstly, Highway's interpretation the trickster and, secondly, the audience's controversial responses regarding his contrasting presentations of the male Trickster in *The Rez Sisters* and the female trickster in *Dry Lip Oughta Move to Kapuskasing*.

This thesis study is comprised of three chapters. The first chapter provides an overview of the cultural aesthetic principles of Tomson Highway's view of art in relation to other contemporary Native artists. In particular, this chapter examines Highway's philosophical approach to theatre which includes the purpose of theatre, his use of mythology, his artistic inspiration and influence, and the role of the artist. The second chapter provides an overview of academic and ethnographic discourse on the trickster figure as presented in Native mythology. This chapter is necessary in order to examine the generic interpretations of the traditional trickster as well as the presentation of the trickster in the more specific Cree/Ojibway cultural context. The third chapter explores Highway's interpretation and contemporary adaptation of the trickster in comparison to the traditional trickster. This chapter also focuses on Highway's character deviations and functional differences related to his presentation of the

---

[24] Marie Annharte-Baker, "Carte Blanche: Angry Enough to Spit But With Dry Lips, It Hurts More Than You Know" Canadian Theatre Review, 68 (Fall 1991), 88.

trickster in relation to the audience response concerning published plays, *The Rez Sisters* and *Dry Lips Oughta Move to Kapuskasing*.

CHAPTER ONE: The Aesthetic Principles of Tomson Highway

Tomson Highway was born on a trapline near Maria Lake in Northern Manitoba in 1951; he was the eleventh of twelve children born to Pelagie Philomene and Joe Highway. To date, Highway has been predeceased by seven of his siblings and his father. For the first six years of his life, Highway was raised in a traditional and remote 'Roc' Cree community whose sustenance relied primarily on hunting, trapping, and fishing. Then, like many Native children in the 1950's, Highway was taken away from his remote community in 1957 to attend Guy Residential School in The Pas, Manitoba at the tender age of six. Throughout his early youth, Highway and his fellow Native students lived in isolation from their communities for at least ten months of every year. Again, like many Native children of this era, Highway was subjected to several years of both sexual and physical abuse at the hands of the Catholic clergy. During the early part of the 1970's, Highway entered University. He attended both the University of Manitoba, and the University of Western Ontario. From the latter, he acquired two degrees: a Bachelor's Degree in Music in 1976 and a Bachelor's Degree in English in 1977. From 1977 to 1982, Highway worked with various Native and government agencies in Social Services and cultural development areas both in Winnipeg and Toronto.

Despite his exposure to the residential school system, Highway is a survivor. He often reflects on his survival through violence, abuse, and racism, and his writing is inarguably explicit, yet symbolic of his life experiences. When publicly challenged by a Native woman about the coarse language and violence contained within the content of his plays, Highway once retorted:

> We have lived through a lot of violence and a lot of us died... .We lived through a lot of shit just to get where we are. And we've seen that kind of ugliness, and we've seen people get shot. From two feet away on a Saturday night, I saw a bullet go through the head of my older brother. When you live through that kind of trauma, you have two methods by which to survive : A) I could kill myself, or B) I can write it out of my system. So, I just scream it out. I chose not to kill myself. And that is my life. If you choose to write about your life in a perfect world, that's your choice. My choice is to write about my life. I've been through hell and high water, and that's my method of survival. There is also a whole generation of us who were sent to

> those boarding schools that you read about, I am one of those people. All of us, with no exception, were molested by the clergy. [1]

It is evident that Highway's explicit quality is a personal choice evident in purposely explicit language and actions. His writing is a testament to his own survival, but is not necessarily meant to be communally therapeutic.

I - The Purpose of Art

Many influential events in Highway's life led to his current career in the theatre. From biographical material and interviews with Highway, it can be concluded that Highway is inspired by music, mythology, and the oral beauty of languages. He is influenced by his family, past mentors, Native visual artists, and select Canadian playwrights. He is striving for the de-colonialization of Native people through the unedited exposure of contemporary social truths in relation to the historical and theological atrocities inflicted on Native people by the government and the churches. Accordingly, Highway views theatre as: a vehicle for the communication of societal truths and the exposure of injustices, a healing instrument to initiate cultural revitalization through the use of mythology, a multi-cultural tool to educate all Canadians about Native people, and an outlet for his own past traumatic experiences.

In order to provide a more extensive examination of Highway's general aesthetic principals, it is necessary to refer to other prominent Native writers, artists, and dramatists for comparative purposes because the study of the Native aesthetics of contemporary Native art is still in its infancy, especially when attempting to examine this subject from a Native perspective. In addition, the aesthetics of Native art, which includes literature, theatre, and visual art, is essentially tied to the cultural existence of the people. Therefore, included within this chapter are references to novelist and folklorist , N. Scott Momaday, novelist and critic, Thomas King, novelist and poet, Jeanette Armstrong, dramatist and actor Floyd Favel, and other select Canadian visual Native artists. These accomplished Native people offer a relevant perspective on the aesthetics of Native art in general, and their perspectives provide valuable insight into Highway's aesthetics by placing his perspective into a more comprehensive context.

One of the most scholarly Native writers to address the philosophical issues in contemporary Native writing is Pulitzer Prize winner, N. Scott Momaday. In addition to critically acclaimed novels like *House Made of Dawn* and *The Way to Rainy Mountain*, Momaday has developed university courses and published several scholarly essays on the relationship between oral literature, art, and reality. As a result, he is one of the most prolific Native authors to publish philosophical theories

---

[1] Tomson Highway. *Special Presentation* October 31, 1994, Mount Royal College.

regarding oral mythology and its role in the development of contemporary Native writing. N. Scott Momaday's assessment of the relationship between myth, art, and reality is interesting as he suggests that the formation of a mythical reality is manifested through the artistic imagination of man. In exploring the relationship between oral tradition, art, and reality Momaday observed that,

> ...the matter of oral tradition suggests certain particularities of art and reality. Art, for example...involves an oral dimension which is based markedly upon such considerations as memorization, intonation, inflection, precision of statement, brevity, rhythm, pace, and dramatic effect. Moreover, myth, legend, and lore, according to our definitions of these terms imply a separate and distinct order of reality. We are concerned here not so much with an accurate representation of actuality, but with the realization of the imaginative experience. [2]

Momaday added to this observation and, subsequently, concluded that the development of literature is an evolutionary "end-product" in the progressive development of cultural expression. [3] He examined oral tradition as the indispensable and original stage in this developmental process, and his philosophical analysis provides insight into the relationship between Native theatre and oral tradition. When oral traditions are transcribed into literary forms, however, they are removed from the imaginative world of artistic interpretation incarnated through oral recitation. Therefore, literature is not the "end-product" of oral tradition, for oral tradition exists independently from progressive development. Instead, the development of literature and other forms of art inspired by oral tradition should be studied as a "by-product" of oral literature rather than an "end-product" . In this light, theatre as a enacted three-dimensional art form differs from visual art and literature, for it retains the oral dimension which enhances the mythical reality of the oral traditions.

Highway has claimed that one of his main reasons for having chosen to work within the medium of the theatre as opposed to other artistic forms was due primarily to the natural correlation and transposition which exists between theatre and the art of traditional storytelling: both are three dimensional forms involving communication, presentation, and performance. The correlation between the theatre and traditional storytelling has been reiterated by Highway on several occasions and is best represented in the following statement:

> For me, the reason is that this oral tradition translates most easily and most effectively into a three dimensional medium. In a sense, it's like taking the 'stage' that lives inside the mind, the imagination, and transposing it - using words, actors, lights, sound - onto the stage in a theatre. For me, it is really a matter of taking a mythology as extraordinary and as powerful as the human imagination itself and re-working it to fit, snugly and comfortably to the medium of the stage. [4]

---

[2] N. Scott Momaday, "The Man Made of Words" Native American Traditions, ed. Sam D. Gill (California: Wadsworth Publishing Company, 1983), 48.

[3] Ibid., 48.

[4] Robert Enright, "Let Us Combine Mythologies: The Theatrical Art of Tomson Highway," Border Crossings 11-4 (Dec 1992), 29.

In relation to the three dimensional principles of the theatre, Highway attaches spiritual significance to the theatrical experience. He proclaims that the "essential ingredient in storytelling is the spoken word. So theatre is just a natural extension of that oral tradition." He also proclaims that whenever the spoken word is communicated "by one living person to another" the event , "necessitates a spiritual exchange" or "a communion of form." [5] It is this spiritual exchange, according to Highway, that makes theatre important. Therefore, the theatre like traditional storytelling, has spiritual significance which cannot be duplicated either in film or through literature. The relationship between the theatre and traditional storytelling for Highway is as follows:

> ... the oral storytelling tradition of Cree people is very strong, very ancient. I suppose I just accidentally came across a form of storytelling which is what theatre is. Basically theatre is all storytelling except it is three dimensionalized. [6]

Highway, like Momaday, subscribes to the concept that the oral dimension of storytelling is a manifestation of the imagination of man in relation to reality and nature. However, Highway has expressed a preference for playwrighting as opposed to other forms of literature primarily because of the performance aspect which involves actors and audiences. In this way, the theatre relates more closely to the nature of traditional storytelling as it maintains the essence of the spoken word. For Highway, the power of the word in performance is innate within the culture and based on thousands of years of oral recitation. In acknowledgment of this concept, he expressed his preference for theatre in the following:

> We inherited about 10,000 years of a tradition, a literary tradition that happens to be oral. I think that what we are doing is essentially continuing that tradition, but taking it one step further, extending it one step over into the three-dimensional medium of the stage by using sound, music, actors, costumes and, most important of all, the spoken word. It is still the oral tradition; that's what I like about it. The spoken word in theatre is its most distinct quality.[7]

Essentially, both Highway and Momaday recognize the significance of oral literature and the art of storytelling within the development of contemporary Native writing. The difference is that Highway views the theatre as a more relative form of expression as it retains the idea of the spoken word and therefore retains the nature of ceremony and/or spiritual exchange between the storyteller and the listener. Moreover, in Canada, as stated earlier, the development of theatre has superseded the development of literature, and Thomas King, like Highway, supports a more natural relationship

---

[5] Tomson Highway. *Personal Interview*. October 31, 1994. Calgary, Alberta.

[6] Carol Grey Eyes, "Interview with Tomson Highway" The Runner (Spring 1994), 4.

[7] Ann Wilson, "Tomson Highway" Other Solitudes: Canadian Multicultural Fiction, ed. Linda Hutcheon and Marion Richmond (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1990), 353.

between the theatre and traditional storytelling. [8] Consequently, it is essential that scholars examine oral literature as a artistic form of expression which, in the contemporary Native community, continues to evoke other artistic forms of expression which co-exist with rather than follow traditional storytelling.

For Momaday, storytelling imaginatively communicates man's experiences and expresses the meaning of the human condition. [9] He identified three objectives attached to traditional storytelling: the first is to delight, the second is to express the wonder of existence, and the third is to understand the meaning of human experiences. Momaday captured this ideology in following statement:

> Storytelling is imaginative and creative in nature. It is an act by which man strives to realize his capacity for wonder, meaning and delight. It is also a process in which man invests and preserves himself in the context of ideal. Man tells stories in order to understand his experience, whatever it may be. The possibilities of storytelling are precisely those of understanding the human experience.[10]

In contemplating the purpose of art in a literary form, Momaday proposed that the state of "being" is an idea of man. Accordingly, language then becomes a realization of the ideals of man as well as man's possession and definitive conception of self. According to Momaday, art is a product of man's imagination, and therefore man realizes himself through art. This philosophy, for Momaday especially, includes all forms of literature. Momaday's philosophy is summarized in the statement below:

> The state of human *being* is an idea, an idea which man has of himself. Only when he is embodied in an ideal and the idea is realized in language, can man take possession of himself. In our particular frame of reference, this is to say that man achieves the fullest realization of his humanity in such an art and product of the imagination as literature - and here I use the term "literature" in its broadest sense. [11]

If we take Momaday's term "literature" in its broadest sense, as suggested, and include the performance texts of the theatre, the above passage becomes important in acknowledging the theatre as a product of man's imagination and a reflection of the realization of human existence.

Native writer, Jeanette Armstrong, proposed that literature as a form of art operates, in part, as a type of record of man's existence. [12] In discussing the purpose of art from a Native perspective, Armstrong associated the creation of art to ceremony and ritual and concluded that the art is a means of

---

[8] Thomas King in Contemporary Challenges, ed. Hartmut Lutz(Saskatoon: Fifth House Publishers, 1991), 109-110.

[9] N. Scott Momaday, "The Man Made of Words" in Native American Traditions, ed. Sam D. Gill (California: Wadsworth Publishing Company, 1983), 51.

[10] Ibid.,48.

[11] Ibid., 48.

[12] In addition to series of published poems and a novel titled, *Slash*, Jeannette Armstrong is the founder and former director of a Native writer's school in British Columbia titled, *En'owkin Centre*.

recording the continuous and new realities of the people. Specifically, she concluded that world renewal is a "creative journey culminating in action and recorded in the functional and expressive arts."[13] Although Armstrong did not specify the "context of ideal " as did Momaday in defining the purpose of storytelling, the concept of "recording" relates in nature to Momaday's idea of "preservation".

In speculating the purpose of Native theatre, Floyd Favel, Native playwright and Artistic Director of Native Earth Performing Arts Inc., stressed the didactic powers of the theatre and also proposed that art in general might be considered an "invocation of the artist for the betterment and power of the people." [14] Like Armstrong, Favel also proposed that theatre should "record and express the truths of the time and the people as humans and as Natives."[15] Although Highway shares a great deal of the basic philosophies of Momaday, Armstrong, and Favel, his views concerning the purpose of Native theatre differ significantly from his colleagues.

Having worked within the theatrical medium for several years, Highway, like many other artists, has developed his own philosophical ideals and objectives about his craft. Firstly, for Highway, the idea of beauty is all encompassing, elusive, and transient. He subscribes to the idea that beauty holds spiritual significance and, as a result, is somehow universally tied to a form of divinity. Just prior to the opening of *Dry Lips Oughta Move to Kapuskasing* at the Royal Alexandra Theatre in Ottawa, Highway expressed his philosophical perspective on the aesthetics of beauty in the following comment:

> The idea of beauty incorporates the physical, sensual, sexual, and spiritual. In its ultimate form, beauty is the closest we come to contact with god - whether we believe in god, heaven, or a supreme electrical energy that drives the universe and its contents. We experience that ideal of the divine beauty and its harmony within forces. The balance is one you find temporarily and momentarily, but it's one that can change your life. [16]

That "ideal beauty" is elusive and momentary, as described by Highway, is a key element to the aesthetic quality of the theatre. As a playwright, this ideology separates Highway from the visual artist and literary writer since the actual theatrical experience is temporary. For Highway, the purpose of art includes the recognition of chaos and the ability to place chaos into a temporary form of order. He expresses this philosophy in the following statement:

---

[13] Jeannette Armstrong, The Native Creative Process, (Penticton B.C.: Theytus Books, 1991), 46.

[14] Floyd Favel. *Personal Interview* Edmonton, Alberta. April 5, 1992.

[15] Ibid.

[16] Jon Kaplan, "Tomson Highway: Ribald Reservation Comedy Set to Rattle Royal Alex" Now, 11-17 (April 1991), 22.

> Art is taking the chaos of the universe (and) the artist takes chunks of that chaos and puts it into a form where it makes a temporary and perfect kind of sense. But handling that raw experience is like handling a red-hot coal - it will scar you. [17]

It can be surmised that "order", when captured, becomes Highway's view of the ideal form of beauty. His view of philosophy regarding the purpose of art in relation order and chaos, however, is both similar to and yet different from Momaday, Armstrong, and Favel's views of art in relation to truth and preservation. Highway, like Momaday, incorporates the concept of "understanding the human experience" into his philosophical view on art. However, Highway, unlike the latter three artists, is not as concerned with "recording truth" or the idea of man "preserving himself" in the ideal. Rather than long term preservation as a primary objective, Highway's philosophy or art is more concerned with the present than the past or future. In other words, order as established within his expressive art form has more of a momentary cognitive purpose which is experiential and results in a temporary or elusive sense of understanding.

In terms of the theatre and its audience, Highway is careful to evaluate the accessibility of his performance texts to a general audience rather than to a select Native audience. He is concerned with the universal condition of man in general and of Native people in particular. In fact, Highway tends to aim at universal motifs and expressed this aspect of his work in the following comment:

> The material I write is layered and certainly a very obvious layer is the aboriginal component. But I think I've studied enough Western and other art to have achieved a level of sophistication where I write beyond the specifics of my aboriginal background and get to the universal human condition. [18]

Highway's view of theatre in relation to truth focuses primarily on the concept of the exposure of the harsh realities rather than the "ideal" as proposed by Momaday . In his preface to *Dry Lips Oughta Move to Kapuskasing*, Highway quoted elder, Lyle Longclaws, who stated that "Before the Healing takes place, the poison must first be exposed. " [19] This quotation signifies Highway's intent, particularly in this play, of using the theatre to expose poison within the Native community and to hopefully initiate a healing process which may lead to the ideal. It is apparent that it is not Highway's intent to heal the community, but rather to merely initiate a healing process. In a traditional sense, he becomes an agent in the healing ceremony rather than the actual healer. In addition, confusion regarding Highway's intent may be derived from ambiguous statements made in recent interviews regarding the similarities between playwrights and shamans.

---

[17] Gerald Hannon," Tomson and the Trickster" Toronto Life, 25•4(March 1991), 36.

[18] Robert Enright. "Let Us Combine Mythologies: The Theatrical Art of Tomson Highway." Border Crossings, 11•4 (Dec 1992), 24.

[19] Lyle Longclaws in Dry Lips Oughta Move to Kapuskasing, Tomson Highway (Fifth House Publishers, 1989), 6.

Since the impact of Norval Morrisseau, whose paintings were linked very closely with sacred shamanistic content, many contemporary Native artists have made statements regarding the correlation between the role of the shaman within a traditional Native society and the role of the artist. In an interview during 1992, Highway himself alluded to this idea when he stated that,

> In a sense, the role of the artist is the role of the shaman in traditional, pre-Christian Indian society. Shamans were the visionaries who led that society into the future, who outlined the path that society was to take. [20]

It is evident from this passage that Highway's use of the term shaman is connected to the role of a visionary, not necessarily a healer . Accordingly, Highway does not proclaim his theatre to be the cure for the societal sickness within the Native community. Instead, it is more accurate to contend that, through his plays, Highway presents his own vision of reality in hopes of being the catalyst for another vision: the ideal state of man's existence. Once this vision is in place, Highway, as the playwright, has initiated a type of healing process. This is a crucial argument in light of some of the negative audience responses to *Dry Lips*. Because Native theatre is still in its infancy and because Tomson Highway is Native, audiences may be expecting a type of healing experience reliant on positive portrayals of the Native community. Therefore, Native audiences may not be prepared to experience the harsh and explicit content within *Dry Lips*.

Highway, like Favel, views theatre as didactic and exploits the possibilities of its instructional boundaries. On several occasions, Highway has reiterated that the theatre is an instrument for the reaffirmation of traditional mythology through the possibilities of dissemination. He has clearly stated that he has concerns regarding the current state of Native people and that "we are all working for a better life for Indian people and a better system of organization. I want to help. " [21] Accordingly, Highway believes that once the traditional mythology is revitalized, Native people will resurrect the strength of a traditional world view and the healing process for the Native communities will begin to take place. Generally, Highway believes that,

> Until we have a generation of Indian people out there who have been inundated with Nanabush stories and incredible literature written by our people, in their language, we won't really have our words as people, as a distinct culture. [22]

---

[20] Robert Enright, "Let Us Combine Mythologies: The Theatrical Art of Tomson Highway" Border Crossings. 11•4 (Dec 1992), 27.

[21] Bryan Loucks,. "Another Glimpse: Excerpts from a Conversation with Tomson Highway" Canadian Theatre Review. 68 (Fall 1991), 10.

[22] Ibid., 9.

At the same time, Highway views the theatre as a source of entertainment and delight. Highway creates riveting drama and is extremely artful at weaving the comic into the tragic or the tragic into the comic. The recognition and creation of humour in the face of tragedy, for Native people, is an innate cultural tool which serves as a proclamation of the cultural tenacity and survival of Native people in general. As a part of this concept, Highway places a great deal of emphasis on humour and the ability to solicit laughter. The creation and manipulation of dramatic tension within Highway's scripts emphasize his intent to entertain. He, in fact, has stated that,

> Theatre is an exciting medium for me because I love entertaining and fabulous stories. I'm riveted by tales that have dramatic tension, that move up and down the scale, brought to life by talented, beautiful people on the stage and the designers and directors who work behind the scenes. [23]

For Highway, theatre provokes thought and has the ability to expose societal truths as a means to facilitate or initiate healing through the recognition and acknowledgment of chaos. He perceives theatre, like storytelling, in sacred terms, for theatre involves the "sacredness of the spoken word" which engages the audience and the theatre artists to participate in a type of spiritual exchange or communion. For Highway, theatre is a source of entertainment , exposure, and instruction influenced by the context and shadings of Native mythology and traditional storytelling practices. Finally, according to Highway, the playwright is the visionary type shaman of the theatre who is gifted with the ability to illuminate societal chaos and establish a sense of direction. In the following statement, Highway reflects on the importance of theatre in universal terms:

> Native culture is beautiful, Native language is beautiful, Native mythology is beautiful and powerful, and these are very relevant, increasingly so as time goes on. At a time in our history as a community of human beings, when the world is about to get quite literally destroyed, and all life forms have a good chance of being completely obliterated - at a crucial time like this, Native people have a major statement to make about the kind of profound change that has to come about in order for the disaster to be averted. From that perspective alone, I think it is important that we put out Native works of literature, Native works of theatre. [24]

II - Artistic Inspiration

Despite his hardships, Highway has enjoyed an eclectic life which has both nurtured and inspired his affinity to art and culture. As a contemporary Native artist, he is inspired most obviously by his exposure to both Western and Native art forms and languages. Highway's primary artistic inspirations

---

[23]Jon Kaplan,"Tomson Highway: Ribald Reservation Comedy Set to Rattle Royal Alex" Now, 11-17 (April 1991), 22.

[24]Jennifer Preston, "Weesageechak Begins to Dance" The Drama Review, 36-2 (Spring 1992), 157.

include his passion for music, his talent in language, and most importantly, his knowledge of and exposure to traditional Native mythology.

Highway's original exposure to Native mythology occurred within the confines of his community and within a society which, at that time, was forced to take traditional practices underground as a means of protection and preservation. Highway affirmed that "the stories were underground; they were secret; they were censored. I heard little bits of stories as a child; there were just a few of them that survived and filtered through." [25] Highway also credits elders and other Native people, whom he had met on the streets while working with Native organizations, for sharing the mythology with him. In addition, he actively sought reading material and other resources concerning the traditional trickster myths. [26] In expressing the degree to which Native mythology has inspired him and is incorporated into his work, Highway explained:

> It is a part of every aspect of my work including the content, form, meaning, and symbolism. I think that the use of mythological symbolism is the most powerful way to tell stories - the most important way of entering people's consciousness and sub-consciousness; it penetrates and touches them to the core. [27]

Highway is also a student of Western mythology. He once explained that "one of my most passionate pursuits when I was at university was the study of mythology. Mostly European - specifically classical Christian, Celtic, and Teutonic mythology - and its application in literature by the artists of those respective cultures." [28] Highway added that "at some point, I found out the process of myth-making is the same in every culture, and it comes from a very basic human impulse - the need to communicate." [29] In *Dry Lips Oughta Move to Kapuskasing*, Highway claimed to base the relationship between the main character Zachary and his wife Hera on the relationship between the Greek deities, Zeus and Hera. [30] Highway added that he doesn't "resist the impulse to combine mythology" because, "ultimately, they are universal and their archetypes are all the same." [31]

Generally, Native visual artists, writers, and dramatists often claim to be inspired by oral literature. This type of inspiration became most apparent in the surge of masterful visual Native art creations which emerged onto the contemporary Canadian art scene during the late 1960's. The art work of Ojibway painters like Daphine Odjig and Norval Morrisseau is intimately tied to the traditional oral

---

[25] Tomson Highway. *Personal Interview*. October 31, 1994. Calgary, Alberta.

[26] Ibid.

[27] Ibid.

[28] Robert Enright, "Let Us Combine Mythologies: The Theatrical Art of Tomson Highway" Border Crossings. 11-4 (Dec 1992), 25.

[29] Ibid., 25

[30] Ibid., 25

[31] Ibid., 25

myths and legends of the Anishnabec people from Northern Ontario. [32] In discussing Odjig's paintings, *Legends of Nanabush* and *Tales from the Smokehouse*, a critic noted that,

> Through the illustrating of oral tradition (mythology), one of the moral and spiritual sources of Ojibwe thought , Odjig found the "spiritual affinity" she sought so frequently through her dreams. Through this, she found a connection with her ancestral fellow Ojibwe.[33]

Direct adaptations of mythical characters, themes, or events are often used as artistic devices within the structure or composition of Native literature. According to Thomas King, the incorporation of any aspect of oral tradition in art involves an objective on behalf of the artist to "reiterate values" through the use of innate tribal knowledge systems containing "fundamental tribal truths". [34] King noted that in the development of a unique and culturally expressive voice, "Native writers have looked to oral literature for inspiration and direction."[35] In theatre, this idea is exemplified by John Mcleod's adaptation and use of the mythical *little people* in *Diary of a Crazy Boy*, and Daniel David Moses' use of the trickster in *Coyote City* and Highway's rendition of the trickster in *Dry Lips Oughta Move to Kapuskasing* and *The Rez Sisters*. In a literary critique of Highway's plays, Daniel David Moses remarked that,

> It can probably be said of Highway's *The Rez Sisters* that it resembles the tales of the Trickster that make up a large part of native peoples' oral literature in that it is at once admonition, instruction and entertainment. Highway has suggested that he concentrates on theatrical writing because the theatre as an art form requires the least formal translation from the oral tradition. ...To his mind, these Native tales are innately theatrical. [36]

Furthermore, Moses also commented that Highway has a unique talent to effectively communicate the sacred lives of the Cree to the general public. Moses observed that,

> Highway's concern with the Trickster and mythology points to the essentially spiritual concerns of his work: concerns which he shares with many other Native writers who are trying to speak across the gap between a culture where the earth is still the great Mother to a culture where God is not only incarnate, but dead. Highway's ability to communicate his sense of the sacred life of the world across the gap is a major part of his accomplishment. [37]

The breadth of oral tradition encompasses creation, migration, and origin myths, historical legends, prophecies, trickster cycles, and secular didactic stories. Oral literature within this Native context is

---

[32] *Anishnabé* is the traditional singular term for the Ojibway people while *Anishnabec* is plural

[33] Robert Houle, "Odjig: An Artist's Transition" The Native Perspective, 3•2 (1978), 44.

[34] Thomas King, " Introduction: An Anthology of Canadian Native Fiction" Canadian Fiction Magazine, 60 (Spring 1987), 8.

[35] Ibid. 8

[36] Daniel David Moses, "The Trickster Theatre of Tomson Highway" Canadian Fiction Magazine, 113/114 (Summer 1987), 87.

[37] Ibid., 87

crucial in the development and sustenance of a world view unique to Native people. The Native world view embodies a distinct culture which often serves as the fundamental inspiration or artistic direction that can be associated with an innate aesthetic perspective of the contemporary artist. [38] The world view of a people is, in simplest terms, "a general way of referring to the manner in which a culture sees and expresses its relation to the world around it." [39] World view is associated with both the individual and collective perspectives of a people. In an ethnographic anthology on Native North American traditions, Sam Gill put forth the following supposition on the expression and formulation of a world view:

> World view, the way one views the world, is experienced and expressed at one level at least in very concrete, although very symbolic, terms. World view is formulated in terms of the physical landscape, architecture, and even the forbidden and discouraged forms of action and relationships...one should look for principles of order and the threat of chaos. One should consider the complex interrelationships of these principles and categories.[40]

Until recently, the accessibility of oral literature was linguistically limited and retained within particular Native communities. In a speech on the relevance and nature of oral traditions, Native writer, N. Scott Momaday, defined oral tradition in the following words:

> The oral tradition is that process by which the myths, legends, tales, and lore of a people are formulated, communicated, and preserved in language by word of mouth , as opposed to writing. Or it is a collection of such things.[41]

Momaday, who based his novel titled, *The Way to Rainy Mountain*, on the traditional Kiowa migration myths, identified three distinct narrative voices in oral literature, "the mythical, the historical, and the immediate." [42] Momaday pointed out that oral tradition includes myths, stories, histories, and life experiences of the human being. From these narratives, Thomas King regards the creation myths to be the most significant in depicting the world view. He explained that within these myths there is a distinguishable "set of relationships which define the world Indian people saw and understood (and still see for that matter): the relationship between humans and the deity, the relationship between humans and the animals, the relationship between good and evil." [43]

One of Highway's objectives as a writer is to attempt to connect with the collective sub-conscious of the audience through the application of universal principles found in mythology. His view of

---

[38] Thomas King, " Introduction: An Anthology of Canadian Native Fiction" Canadian Fiction Magazine, 60 (Spring 1987), 8.

[39] Barre Toelken, The Dynamics of Folklore. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1979), 225.

[40] Sam D. Gill, "Imagining Native American Religions" Native American Traditions, (California: Wadsworth Publishing Company, 1983), 19.

[41] N. Scott Momaday, "The Man Made of Words" Native American Traditions, ed.Sam D. Gill (California: Wadsworth Publishing Company, 1983), 48.

[42] Ibid, 50.

[43] Thomas King, " Introduction: An Anthology of Canadian Native Fiction" Canadian Fiction Magazine, 60 (Spring 1987), 7.

mythology is reflective of the concept of the collective sub-conscious and the principles regarding the universality of mythology as proposed by Jungian psychology. Consequently, he does not feel that the inclusion of Native mythology alienates non-Native audiences. In addressing this issue, Highway explained,

> I think what happens is that non-Native people understand it ultimately on a subconscious level - the moment it sticks to them. They may not understand the play intellectually the moment they see it or read it, but from the moment that it sticks with them, it is with them for a life-time. It enters their psyche, and it stays there; it becomes imbedded permanently. I think it takes them back through a collective memory to a point beyond their Christian beginnings (which is only 2, 000 years old in Europe compared to 20, 000 years of Native spirituality on this continent called Turtle Island) when those pagan gods were alive and totally functional. Europeans had trickster figures too - tricksters who could be male and/or female. The most matrilineal institutional religion in history, which was Christianity, worked so hard at wiping out, and brutally wiping out, all those earth based female religions. So I take non-Natives back to that time, I think. There is still some message there for them that they understand. These plays can have such an effect right around the world, not just here. [44]

The study of mythology, its meaning, content, and origin and its relationship to the sub-conscious and collective unconscious of mankind has been the focus of many scholars including Levi-Straus, Carl Jung, Paul Radin, and N. Scott Momaday. For Native people, mythology has a sacred place within culture, and the myths themselves are viewed as being connected to a spiritual reality. Accordingly, several Native artists have attributed their creative talent as being "a gift from the creator." In the Native community, this concept is widely accepted, unquestioned, and generally undefinable beyond this point. In 1977, late Native artist, Benjamin Chee Chee, experienced a dry spell in his work and ascribed it to the fact that his creative vision was not with him. Chee Chee defined the lack of creative vision as, "the curse of the creative people, when creative instincts seem to desert one." [45] In her study on Ojibwe artists, Mary Southcott made the following observation:

> The Anishnabe artists often speak of receiving inspiration for painting from visions or their dreams....Dreams are also a vital part of the belief system of the Algonkian people. Perhaps this cultural propensity to dream is beneficial to a successful career in art.[46]

In defining the creative process of the artist, Floyd Favel observed that "an artist might have or hope for dialogue with the spirits." [47]

---

[44] Tomson Highway. *Personal Interview*. October 31, 1994. Calgary, Alberta

[45] Mary E. Southcott, The Sound of the Drum: The Sacred Art of the Anishnabec, (Erin, Ontario: Boston Mills Press, 1984), 167

[46] Ibid., 68.

[47] Floyd Favel *Personal Interview* April 5 1992. Edmonton, Alberta.

To date, Highway has not specifically addressed the concept of spiritual invocation and its relationship to the artistic process. The whole aspect of spirituality and art is a difficult topic to address for one must take into account many undeniable concepts and variables. However, Highway has alluded to his dreams as being a factor which, at times, has been inspirational to his work. This idea was paraphrased by Nancy Wigston in a feature article for *Books in Canada* when she stated that "Tomson says he still dreams in Cree, all his stories come to him in Cree. The ethos of the Cree language - quite unlike English - forms the basis of this plays." [48] Although Highway is not explicit about the role that dreams and visions play in the context of his creative process, he has on several occasions discussed the importance of dreams within a cultural context. He once noted:

> The mythology of a people is the articulation of the dream world of that people; without the dream life being active in all its forms - from the most extreme beauty to the most horrific and back - the culture of that people is dead. It is a dead culture and it is, in effect, a dead people we speak of. [49]

Highway has also incorporated the dream world within the content of his play, *Dry Lips Oughta Move to Kapuskasing*. For Highway, the dream is used as a metaphorical and theatrical device to express the philosophical and metaphysical realities of Native people. In the following, Highway expresses the cultural importance of the dream world to the Cree:

> I believe that dreams form the basis of our generic history, linking us back to the beginning of our creation as human beings. Through our dreams, we are able to journey into realms of the spirit that are as ancient as the human condition itself and as modern as our most recent experiences. It is there, in our dreams, that we come into direct contact with the vast collective of human consciousness, a contact that enables us to confront our individual, mythical "evils" and "monsters" and thus eventually embrace the final, great transformation. [50]

In addition to mythology, Highway's aesthetic style and process is also inspired by the inter - connection between language, humour, and music. The concept of the beauty of multi-lingualism is of key importance to Highway. For Highway, languages are the key to understanding the cultural perspectives and value systems of various societies. His view on language is reflected in the following statement:

> I know so many people who speak only one language; to me, that's cultural poverty. I'm not a political person, by any stretch of the imagination, but I suppose, if I were

---

[48] Nancy Wigston, "Nanabush in the City: A Profile of Tomson Highway" Books in Canada, 18•2 (March 1989), 8.

[49] Jennifer Preston, "Weesageechak Begins to Dance: Native Earth Performing Arts" The Drama Review, 3•1 (Spring 1992), 141.

[50] Raoul Trujillo. Program. *Son of Ayash*. (12 February 1991) Toronto, Ontario. Native Earth Performing Arts Inc.

> given a chance to create a world, it would be one where multi-lingualism was accepted as the norm; I find uni-lingualism sad. [51]

Highway has learned the art of tri-lingual manipulation. His fluency in three languages provides him with an insight into the particular aesthetic qualities of each language. In a presentation at the University of Calgary, Highway summarized his ability to manipulate the nature of the three languages within his own world when he stated that,

> English is not an emotional or sentimental language. When I want to love, I speak French. When I want to laugh, I speak Cree. When I want to make money, I speak English. [52]

Highway's experience at residential school included, not only abuse and the process of forced Christianization, but also the attempt of the missionaries to dismantle the Native languages. Despite these attempts, Highway managed to maintain his first language which has played a large role in the artistic process and aesthetic style of his scripts. Highway's parents were fluent in Cree, Chipweyan, and Inuktitut. [53] Like his parents, Highway is also trilingual. Ironically, Highway's parents did not learn European languages at all, yet Highway is fluent in one Native language and two European languages.

Highway agrees with many scholars, in particular N. Scott Momaday, that language is intimately connected to the world view of a people. The attempt to dismantle Native languages within the residential schools created cultural deprivation because, as Highway stated, "restructuring the language provides an opportunity to restructure the philosophical world view of the people." [54] Highway is also fully aware of the issues and difficulties surrounding translation. He attributes these difficulties to the inability for one language to accurately capture the world view and essence of another. As a playwright, whose first language is Cree, this becomes a primary concern. In an article on Native mythology, Highway acknowledged the accessibility of English versus Cree and noted,

> The difficulties Native writers encounter as writers, however, is that we must use English if our voice is to be heard by a large enough audience: English and not Cree. The Cree language is so completely different and the world view that language engenders and expresses is so completely different - at odds, some would say - that inevitably, the characters we write into our plays, must, of necessity, lose some of their original lustre in the translation. [55]

---

[51] Ann Wilson, "Tomson Highway" Other Solitudes: Canadian Multiculturalism Fiction, ed. by Linda Hutcheson and Marion Richmond (Toronto: Oxford Unversity Press 1990), 355.

[52] Tomson Highway. *Special Presentation*. February 23, 1993. University of Calgary.

[53] Gerald Hannon, "Tomson and the Trickster" Toronto Life, 25-4 (March 1991), 31-32.

[54] Tomson Highway, *Special Presentation*. February 23, 1993. University of Calgary.

[55] Tomson Highway, "On Native Mythology" Theatrum, 6 (Spring 1987), 30.

The preservation of many Native languages has been threatened as a result of the historical effects of Christianization and education. This, of course, is of great concern to artists like Highway who have attempted to encourage and promote aspiring Native playwrights to incorporate their own languages into their scripts. Highway's use of both Cree and English is a key element in his creative writing process and attempt to resolve a dilemma. Highway writes several drafts of his scripts prior to publication or performance and claims that he uses English and Cree interchangeably. [56] These drafts often involve fluid interaction between Cree and English. Highway summarized that the result of his methodology is "like using the English language to explore a Cree sensibility" and "like using the English language filtered through a Cree imagination." [57]

Critic, Nigel Hunter, who had seen a production of *Dry Lips Oughta Move to Kapuskasing* in Toronto, felt that the Cree language presented difficulties for the audience members who were not Cree speakers. Although translating from Cree to English on stage would certainly have a negative effect on the aesthetic presentation, Hunter observed that,

> In the printed text, all of the Cree is translated for the reader, while in the production theatre goers who don't speak Cree were left to wonder. [58]

Highway, on the contrary, does not claim to write exclusively for a Cree speaking audiences and feels that the use of Cree on stage should not be a barrier to theatrical communion between the playwright and the audience . In fact, Highway is somewhat experimental with the Cree language on stage and generally feels that the nature of theatre and the artists involved more than compensates for and replaces the need for translation. Highway's confidence in theatre and the artists involved is reflected in the following statement:

> That is one of the advantages of the theatre, that you can use a language the audience doesn't necessarily understand intellectually, but the way it's staged, the way the actor's body moves, gesticulates and what not, you can make an audience understand the gist of it. ...And it's very gutsy, earthy and all those things. And its the best way I tell stories, Indian stories. I tell stories about my people, my community. [59]

Despite Highway's views on the accessibility of the Cree language to general theatre audiences, the essence of Native humour, which is an important characteristic of Highway's plays, can be somewhat exclusive. This is because Native humour is based on the linguistic aspects of the original language. The concept of "Indian humour" is a subject of great interest to literary scholars both in the

---

[56] Carol Grey Eyes,"Interview with Tomson Highway" The Runner. (Spring 1994), 5.

[57] Jennifer Preston, "Weesageechak Begins to Dance: Native Earth Performing Arts" The Drama Review, 3•1 (Spring 1992), 142.

[58] Nigel Hunt, "Tracking the Trickster" Brick, 37 (Autumn 1989), 59.

[59] Carol Grey Eyes,"Interview with Tomson Highway" The Runner , (Spring 1994), 5.

United States and Canada. [60] In analyzing Highway's plays, a literary critic who had experienced *Dry Lips* in performance concluded that,

> Cultural differences are perhaps most evident where humour is involved. Analyzing the humour in *The Rez Sisters* and *Dry Lips* becomes difficult in Western literary terms and that is one reason why Highway's plays are so uniquely Manitoban Indian. He has captured the very essence of the culture. Non-Natives need to experience these plays in the company of Native audiences to fully appreciate the humour. [61]

This type of humour, although diluted in the English language, has been transmitted into the contemporary urban communities through dialect. However, Highway's approach to writing, which involves the inter-change of Cree and English, identifies him as one of a handful of Native writers who is able to capture a fairly pure form of 'Indian humour' in his texts. Highway's bilingual composition process has enabled him to evoke comedy and laughter in the face of the most serious tragedy, which is a characteristic of the cultural make-up of his first language. On the polarity between comedy and tragedy, which is an innate characteristic of the Cree language, Highway explained:

> The Cree culture is hilarious, the language is hilarious. ... But the other side of it is that to make a statement that is brutally honest, you have to count upon incredible hilarity and incredible ridiculousness. And so the plays are structured in such a way that you have to laugh at what seem to be the most inappropriate moments. But it works. It happened in *Dry Lips* time and time again. [62]

The quality of Native humour has evolved and been disseminated through the recitation and content of Native mythology, especially the Trickster myths. In traditional mythology, the humour itself is often visceral. Sexuality, sexual organs, and body excretions serve as valuable comedic material. Highway's creative dialogue and overall content in both of his published plays is demonstrative of the visceral aspects of the mythological humour. On the subject of humour and its relationship to language and mythology, Highway explained that,

> The language that grew out of that mythology is hilarious. When you talk Cree, you laugh, constantly. And secondly, it's very visceral. You talk quite openly about the functions of the body which in English are taboo. [63]

---

[60] The term "Indian Humor' is commonly used by Native literary scholars like Thomas King, N. Scott Momaday, and Vine Deloria Jr. (author of *God is Red*) in reference to a type of humor unique to Native people and primarily inaccessible to non-Natives through translation. See also "Indian Humor" by Vine Deloria Jr. in *Literature of the American Indians* by Abraham Chapman.

[61] Agnes Grant, "Canadian Native Literature: The Drama of George Ryga and Tomson Highway" Australian-Canadian Studies , 10•2 (1992), 50.

[62] Robert Enright,"Let Us Now Combine Mythologies: The Theatrical Art of Tomson Highway" Border Crossings, 11•4 (December 1992), 27.

[63] Nancy Wigston, "Nanabush in the City: A Profile of Tomson Highway" Books in Canada, (March 1989), 8.

To add to the auditory quality of Cree humour, Highway's knowledge of musical composition has been purposely incorporated into his writing style. For Highway, language and music, like language and humour, are interconnected. As a young child, Highway excelled in his music lessons and in no time became somewhat of a child prodigy, and he claimed to have "lusted after the piano "although he was not actually permitted to officially take lessons until he was thirteen. [64] After residential school, Highway went on to study music at Churchill High School in Winnipeg and the University of Manitoba in the early 1970's. In 1972, Highway was invited to tour Europe with his music professor William Aide and his family, and, during this time, he received exposure to classical art forms including opera. [65] In several interviews, Highway has acknowledged Aide as an early mentor who offered him extensive encouragement in and exposure to the arts.

Highway possessed both the talent and the skill necessary to become a professional concert pianist. However, he often concedes to having had difficulties visualizing himself as a professional pianist because his life would have become too disconnected from the plight of his people. It was with this realization in mind that Highway returned to Canada and began to "pay his dues" and work within urban organizations which provided assistance to the Native community. Highway's knowledge of the arts combined with his experience on the streets were the primary catalytic life experiences which eventually directed his creative energies towards the theatre. Within the theatre, Highway saw an opportunity to exercise his creative talents as well as influence society in order to evoke positive social and spiritual changes for his people.

His exposure to classical music and his knowledge of composition have continued to influence his creative process and inspire his artistic development; however, his experience as a classical pianist provided him with an instinct for the natural rhythms of writing. He once remarked that "I always had the attitude of using language as a musical instrument. To me, language is music." [66] Highway's creative writing process incorporates the compositional aspects of music. In reference to the development of his scripts Highway once claimed:

> I could even draw on some of the same musical concepts. Both music and theatre speak to a live audience. The dialogue I write is a kind of singing, though orchestral rather than for a solo instrument. From the construction of a sentence to that of an entire scene, my writing is like music making - I think about phrasing, harmony, counterpoint and rhythm. [67]

---

[64] Gerald Hannon, "Tomson and the Trickster" Toronto Life, 25-4 (March 1991), 35.

[65] Ibid., 37.

[66] Carol Grey Eyes ,"Interview with Tomson Highway" The Runner, (Spring 1994), 4.

[67] Jon Kaplan,"Tomson Highway: Ribald Reservation Comedy Set to Rattle Royal Alex" Now, 11-17 (April 1991), 22.

In an interview with Daniel David Moses, Highway disclosed that his training in musical composition also influences his sense of character development. Moses noted that "he uses characters like themes and thinks of character conflict in terms like counterpoint and contrast." [68] Highway also stated that he structures his plays as if they were musical arrangements and that this structure,

> ...works psychologically on the human brain and on human emotions. You can subdivide that whole note, which is the beat of the human heart, into quarter notes, eighth notes, sixteenth notes, and thirty second notes, and complex configurations there of, including variations and combinations of pitch, meaning, counterpart, harmony and so forth. What I'm saying is that I transfer all that knowledge into the construction of a line. [69]

III - Artistic Influences

Tomson Highway is influenced by many factors and people in his life. For example, Highway is extremely open about his homosexuality and generally feels that his sexual orientation combined with his Aboriginal ancestry has provided him with a unique view of the world. He has proclaimed that his perception of the world has provided him with distinct insight into the certain facets of society and an opportunity to observe society as an outsider. He once remarked:

> What I appreciate about my sexuality is that it gives me the status of outsider. And as a native, I am an outsider in a double sense. That gives you a wider vision, a more in-depth vision into the ways of human behavior, into the ways the world works. [70]

Highway's sexual orientation has not only provided him with societal exclusivity, it has also served as the basis for thematic developments within his plays and manifested itself in his tendency to address gender issues and motifs. Highway layers his writing with metaphorical content; therefore, he also addresses sexuality from this context. Highway expressed his elusive approach to gender issues when he disclosed, in the following passage, that he dealt in metaphorical terms with his own sexual 'coming out' through his writing:

> But I want to write about it myself. I want it to come out in a way that's natural but at the same time metaphorical. The issue deserves that kind of treatment. It was simultaneously too beautiful and too horrifying to talk about in any way other than the poetic, the metaphoric, the symbolic. [71]

Highway is a master in the employment of symbols and metaphors. It was once stated that "Highway's fluency with theatrical imagery makes his plays much stronger on the stage than on the

---

[68] Daniel David Moses, "The Trickster Theatre of Tomson Highway" Canadian Fiction Magazine, 113/114 (Summer 1987), 87-88.

[69] Robert Enright, "Let Us Now Combine Mythologies: The Theatrical Art of Tomson Highway" Border Crossings, 11•4 (December 1992), 24.

[70] Gerald Hannon, "Tomson and the Trickster" Toronto Life, 25•4 (March 1991), 36.

[71] Ibid. 37.

page." [72] It is evident from his work that he has a current fascination with dynamics of gender roles and sexual identity within Native societies. His exploration of the subject includes the incorporation of issues surrounding the impact of Western feminism, cultural suppression, and Christianity on Native communities attempting to adjust to rapid societal change. In explaining the subject matter of his plays, Highway confided:

> At this point in my career, I'm heavily into the whole gender issue, the male/female dichotomy, the sexual hierarchy, which is an area that knows no racial boundaries. Partly because these things are layered constructions, they can be very easily misunderstood and a lot of people do misunderstand them. I've been called everything from a racist to a sexist and I've been accused of purposely promoting racism and sexism.[73]

Highway's interest in the male/female dichotomy has definitely directed his interpretation of the mythical trickster figure which he claims to be "gender-free". [74] A critic noted that, "*Dry Lips* pursues Highway's fascination with sexual transformation by making the Nanabush figure a gender blended character who celebrates all possible forms of physicality." [75] This aspect of Highway's work requires extensive examination and will be explored in more detail later in the study.

In terms of the rapidly changing roles of Native men and women within Native communities, Highway believes that the imposition of Christianity has disrupted traditional gender roles, and, as a result, created a negative impact on the Native community and propelled the culture into a state of spiritual chaos. This spiritual chaos is the result of an enforced change from a matriarchal based religion to a patriarchal based religion. Through his plays, Highway 's intent is to induce a healing mode and to re-establish the structure of a matriarchal religious base. After an intensive interview with Highway, a journalist concluded:

> Through his work, the once sacred relationships of land, women, men, and children are revealed as disconnection and distortion through subjugation to a patriarchal colonial society. ... Tomson calls for the rediscovery of the sacred woman in all of us, a woman and land who have been raped, distorted, and abused by centuries of exploitation, oppression and victimization. He calls for the rekindling of the spirits that have for so long been the source of fear, confusion, denial, and persecution. [76]

---

[72] Denis W. Johnston, "Lines and Circles: The Rez Plays of Tomson Highway" Canadian Literature, 124/125 (Spring/Summer 1990), 262.

[73] Robert Enright,"Let Us Now Combine Mythologies: The Theatrical Art of Tomson Highway" Border Crossings, 11-4 (December 1992), 24.

[74] Nancy Wigston, "Nanabush in the City: A profile of Tomson Highway" Books in Canada, (March 1989), 8-9.

[75] Jon Kaplan,"Tomson Highway: Ribald Reservation Comedy Set to Rattle Royal Alex" Now, 11-17 (April 1991), 22.

[76] Brian Loucks, "Another Glimpse: Excerpts from a Conversation with Tomson Highway" Canadian Theatre Review, 68 (Fall 1991), 11.

The term "persecution" is a direct accusational reference to the Catholicism and the whole process of forced Christianization. As a product of the missionary school system, Highway's exposure to abuse and racism within this system has most certainly influenced his writing. This impact is pronounced most clearly within the thematic development of *Dry Lips Oughta Move to Kapuskasing*. In the following statement, Highway clearly and emotionally expressed his anger towards the Catholic Church:

> I have every reason to fight when I think what Christianity has done to me personally, never mind what it has done to my race. It's been an act of monumental dishonesty, monumental two-facedness. To have it hammered into your head by so-called figures of authority that sex and the human sex organs were disgusting and dirty instruments of the devil - at a time when your own sexuality is at such a delicate place of development - was deeply confusing. But to turn that around and have ten-year-olds victimized by a priest who goes around diddling little boys. What I'm angry at is those priests who said one thing and then when the lights went out, they did the complete opposite. [77]

Highway's method of fighting back is through creative expression. In addition, Highway places a strong emphasis on the male oriented religions, which is how he views Christianity, versus female oriented religions, which is how he views Native spirituality. As symbols for each of these religions, Highway often makes comparisons to Christ and the Trickster as the primary teachers within each religion. On a metaphorical level, Highway's emotional memory motivates multi-layered metaphorical content which represents the theological struggle between two opposing religious foundations. In the following passage, Highway explained the contrast between the two religions:

> I wanted to represent the rape of a matriarchal, female-based religion - seen through the specifics of a little Indian reserve in Nothern Ontario. [78]

The metaphorical concept of the male versus female religions has led Highway into another layer of metaphor, which is rape. Rape exists in both *The Rez Sisters* and *Dry Lips*. In *The Rez Sisters*, the audience is exposed to a disturbing and visually explicit monologue by the emotionally disturbed character, Zhaboonigan. For Highway, the rape of Zhaboonigan is based on the fictional rape and murder of a fellow student from Guy Residential School, Helen Betty Osborne. Osborne was raped in The Pas, Manitoba during the early 1970's while on a break from the residential school. The perpetrators of the rape in *The Rez Sisters*, as in the Osborne case, are a gang of non-Native men who pick up Zhaboonigan while she is outside the protective boundaries of the reserve and alone within the non-Native world. Zhaboonigan, like Osborne, is raped with a screw-driver and left to die. In a public presentation, Highway once declared that Native women "have had the whiteman's garbage, everything

---

[77] Robert Enright,"Let Us Now Combine Mythologies: The Theatrical Art of Tomson Highway" Border Crossings, 11•4 (December 1992), 26.

[78] Gerald Hannon, "Tomson and the Trickster" Toronto Life, 25•4 (March 1991),81-82.

from broken bottles to screw drivers, shoved up their c_ _ ts for the past 150 years. " [79] Among other things, the rape is a metaphor for the persecution and abuse of Native women.

In *Dry Lips*, Highway's metaphorical use of rape is even more direct. The trickster, in the form of a pregnant woman, is raped by the emotionally disturbed Native character Dicki-Bird, who is a victim of Fetal Alcohol Syndrome. The trickster is violently penetrated with a crucifix, the most powerful symbol of Christianity. Highway explains the scene as follows:

> The rape episode is a metaphor for the collision of matriarchal religion and patriarchal force, with the rape if the god-as-woman by a male figure. Until patriarchal theology goes out the window, women will be treated this way. [80]

In this scene, the metaphor represents the historical process of Christianization in which Christianity was enforced on Native people at the expense of Native Spirituality. Highway's use of the rape metaphor and symbols in this scene had a powerful emotional impact on women in general and Native women in specific (their responses will be examined in more detail at a later point in the study). However, Highway's use of metaphor has also attracted the attention and praise of Canadian playwrights like James Reaney.

James Reaney has been one of the most influential professional playwrights of Tomson Highway's career. Highway had the opportunity to work with Reaney on a production of *Woucousta* in 1975. [81] He acknowledged that *The Donnelly Trilogy* had a great impact on him and his use of metaphorical myth when he stated:

> In these plays, man and gods interact . By means of poetic metaphor, Reaney transformed Mr. and Mrs. Donnelly into Father Sky and Mother Earth, the seven sons become the stars, the daughter the moon. I'll never forget it. [82]

After experiencing *Dry Lips*, Reaney, who was favorably impressed, praised Highway when he stated: "A lot of people don't think that way, in terms of myths and legends. He's so clearheaded about how to organize dramatic material. " [83]

Having been involved in the theatre for many years, Highway has acquired great appreciation for the artistic collaboration engendered by the nature of theatre arts. He once stated that one of the aspects that he finds most exciting about the theatre is the manifestation of a dramatic presentation

---

79 Tomson Highway, *Special Presentation*. October 31, 1994. Mount Royal College.

80 Jon Kaplan,"Tomson Highway: Ribald Reservation Comedy set to Rattle Royal Alex" Now, 11-17 (April 1991), 22.

81 Gerald Hannon, "Tomson and the Trickster" Toronto Life, 25-4 (March 1991), 38.

82 Nancy Wigston, "Nanabush in the City: A Profile of Tomson Highway" Books in Canada, (March 1989), 9.

83 Gerald Hannon, "Tomson and the Trickster" Toronto Life, 25-4 (March 1991), 38.

through the process of collaborative artistic efforts. He often referred to this process as "magic." This idea is best reflected in the following passage:

> In theatre, a lot of magic comes from the collaboration that you have with other people: actors, with director, with designers, the production type people, or producers. It's a communal effort and that makes it even more exciting for me. [84]

Until the signing of the treaties, the majority of Native cultures in Canada were communal and sometimes nomadic by nature; thus, it only seems natural that Highway would recognize and be attracted to the sense of community created within the context of a working 'ensemble-like' theatrical environment. The idea of the ensemble approach to theatre is not a new concept to theatrical artists. The sense of community, however, evoked within the theatre has a natural affinity to the sense of community and the very definition of community as it exists in a Native cultural context. The following passage reflects Highway's perspective on the concept of community in relation to the theatre: .

> I think the essential fact about the magic of theatre is... that you work within the community, you work in very close quarters with other human beings. It is a very communal sort of activity ... . It is a human-to-human kind of interaction in that room. There is a spiritual exchange there. That is quite magical, and that's why I was drawn to theatre, and why so many of us have joined the theatre. It's a natural transition from oral storytelling to modern theatre. [85]

IV - Form and Structure

Most historians agree that the origin of theatre in Western culture is derived from myth and ritual. The colonialization of Native North America brought cultural devastation to Native people bringing with it Western technology, religion, education, and philosophies. As a result, Native theatre has come to be reliant on a Western concept of theatre in regard to form and presentation. In reference to literature, Thomas King noted that "contemporary fiction written by Native writers attempts to create a bridge between oral tribal literature and contemporary written literature," [86] while Floyd Favel observed that "theatre is highly influenced by Western dramatic structure and form" and that the Native creative process involves "a very complex process in finding a balance between circular and linear thinking." [87] Native dramatist Monique Mojica reiterated the bi-cultural structure of playwrighting in the following passage:

> We are reclaiming the power of the word. Some of us are writing and performing in the ancient languages of the First Nations, some of us are taking the language of colonialization, whether it be English, French, Spanish, or Portuguese and transforming it into new theatrical language, borrowing the tools and techniques of

---

[84] Carol Grey Eyes, "Interview with Tomson Highway" The Runner, (Spring 1994), 6.

[85] Ibid., 4.

[86] Thomas King, " Introduction: An Anthology of Canadian Native Fiction" Canadian Fiction Magazine, 60 (Spring 1987), 7.

[87] Floyd Favel , *Personal Interview* April 5, 1992, Edmonton, Alberta.

> European theatre to create craft. There are many ways to approach this synthesis; the result is the possibility of offering an alternative world-view (one which may co-exist); the possibility of another interpretation of 'historical facts', the validation of our experience and our images reflected on stage. [88]

Tomson Highway stated that his ability to draw on Western ideologies and techniques enabled him to "apply that structure, utilize it for the telling of Cree myth made contemporary."[89] Highway also claimed that, as a Native person, his university education and exposure to Western myths as well as classical music and literature provided the skills necessary to make a smooth transition to the theatre. He reflected on this transition in the following statement:

> So I started writing plays, where I put my knowledge of Indian reality in this country with classical structure, artistic language. It amounted to applying sonata form to the spiritual and mental situation of a street drunk, say, at the corner of Queen and Bathurst. [90]

Although the overall structure of Highway's plays follows a Western linear format, Native structural and cultural elements can also be noted. For example, Native people view the world from a cyclic rather than linear progression of events. Highway acknowledged the importance of cyclic time as opposed to linear time when he explained that,

> This is the way Cree look at life. A continuous cycle. A self-rejuvenating force. By comparison, Christian theology is a straight line. Birth, suffering, and then the apocalypse....Human existence isn't a struggle for redemption to the Trickster. It's fun, a joyous celebration. [91]

But while Highway's plays are basically linear in the overall structure, cyclic patterns of design exist in character and community development. For example, deaths in the plots are often balanced by births or pregnancies marking community renewal. Critic, Denis Johnston, also noted that in *The Rez Sisters*, "the play depends on cyclic character journeys rather than on the plot line. " [92] He also noted that in both plays, " linear elements generally show characters becoming lost by stubbornly following a straight line, while circular elements signal regeneration. " [93] On the subject of birth and death, Highway explained:

---

[88] Monique Mojica, "Theatrical Diversity on Turtle Island: A Tool Towards the Healing" Canadian Theatre Review, 68 (Fall 1991), 3.

[89] Ann Wilson, "Tomson Highway" Other Solitudes: Canadian Multiculturalism Fiction, ed. by Linda Hutcheson and Marion Richmond (Toronto: Oxford Unversity Press 1990), 355.

[90] Denis W. Johnston, "Lines and Circles: The Rez Plays of Tomson Highway" Canadian Literature, 124/125 (Spring/Summer 1990), 254.

[91] Ted Ferguson, "Native Son" Imperial Oil Review, (Winter 1989),18.

[92] Denis W. Johnston, "Lines and Circles: The Rez Plays of Tomson Highway" Canadian Literature, 124/125 (Spring/Summer 1990), 255.

[93] Ibid., 257.

> With our theological system, there was no beginning or end. It was a continuous circle. Birth and life and death. Generation after generation after generation so that time was of no consequence whatsoever. [94]

In addition to cyclic patterns, Highway also explores cultural content which includes, not only mythology, but the creation of a Native community which promotes the ideology that individuals are a part of a larger circle. From a traditional perspective, this ideology incorporates the concept of inter-connectedness. Not only are the characters in Highway' s plays somehow inter-related, they each have a necessary function within the community. Individual characters are definable by their position in and interaction with the community. The community becomes the mirror which provides character definition. This is especially true when studying the female characters in *The Rez Sisters*. Each character becomes more complex as character interaction unfolds and truths are gradually exposed. This is also true of the men in *Dry Lips*. In addition, all characters are on equal ground, and there is a balance between strengths and weaknesses and good and evil. In other words, there exists a balance of equality within community circle, and there is also a lack of clear hierarchy and individual importance. On the contrary, the hierarchy appears to shift from one character to another depending on the situation. The perfect example of this is the argument which breaks out between the characters near the end of Act one of *The Rez Sisters*. There is no winner or loser; each character demonstrates strengths and has weaknesses exposed.

As the characters are a part of an intimate community, their relationship to the land becomes a strong element in defining the community itself. In *The Rez Sisters*, the reserve itself takes on its own character as the women's lives become intertwined with the land base. For some, the reserve represents healing, for others safety, protection, paradise, or prison. In *Dry Lips*, unlike *The Rez Sisters*, the condition of the land or reserve itself is not the focal point of common discussion, but the spiritual condition of community. Thus, all the male characters are active participants in Zachary's dream world, which focuses on the spiritual sickness of the community and supports the return of traditional spirituality as the healing agent.

V - Responsibility of the Artist

While the philosophies governing communal societies emerge as the major theme in Native writing, artists themselves have inherited the cultural value of communal responsibility. Thus, there is often an attempt by the artist to demonstrate an understanding and respect for traditional knowledge in his/her work. Generally, communal responsibility in the Native community often supersedes the idea of

---

[94] Tomson Highway, "Portrait of an Artist" Human Rights Forum. 4•I•1 (Winter 1994), 5.

individual accomplishment and is a traditional value derived from the Native world view which reflects a communal societal structure. As a result, the majority of Native artists are concerned about the people as a whole, and, for the betterment of the people, Native artists are expected to have access to the knowledge system of their people. This idea is best exemplified in the words of Native visual artist, Blake Debassige. In an interview with an anthropologist, Debassige was asked to identify and explain individual symbols and colors schemes in his paintings. He responded in the following words:

> I feel uncomfortable talking this way. It seems to me that all these things about colors, about numbers, about plants, about people, all these things are interrelated. When you start breaking things up you go back to something else. You destroy something. It's a matter of learning wisdom, an ancient wisdom. It's your duty to learn about these things you should respect. So when you think about 'four' you respect it. Or when you use a certain colour it means this or that. [95]

In an interview, Floyd Favel, like Debassige, discussed the duty of the Native artist to actively seek out and be aware of traditional knowledge. In doing so, Favel reiterated the invested communal interests in the Native artist. He explained that it is the artist's responsibility to "remain connected to the place that has given the artists the knowledge and permission to express and communicate truths."[96] Favel not only emphasized the necessity for the artist to remain connected to his/her roots, he also introduced the concept of "permission." It would appear that, according to Favel, a Native artist must have permission to disclose tribal truths, whether they be contemporary or traditional. Favel added that the Native artist has "a moral responsibility to the people " as it is the people who, "judge the truths to be true." [97] Favel concluded that "community permission and positive acceptance constitutes approval of the Native community" and that "acceptance of the non-Native artistic community is an added bonus." [98]

Jeanette Armstrong shares the idea of responsibility to the community in relation to traditional knowledge and conceded that "full creativity in any given area thus pre-requires the fullest knowledge available about that area and its impact on others."[99] According to the philosophies of her people, public presentation has great power, and once the word has been placed into the universe, "you cannot call your words back... , so you are responsible for all which results from your words. " [100] With this in mind, Armstrong stressed that the artist should "prepare very seriously and carefully to make public contributions" and that "creative activity is a deep spiritual responsibility requiring as full an awareness as possible of its sacred nature and the necessity for pure love to be at its centre."[101]

---

[95] Mary E. Southcott, The Sound of the Drum: The Sacred Art of the Anishnabec, (Erin, Ontario: Boston Mills Press, 1984), 189.

[96] Floyd Favel, *Personal Interview*. April 5, 1992, Edmonton, Alberta.

[97] Ibid.

[98] Ibid.

[99] Jeannette Armstrong, The Native Creative Process, (Penticton B.C.: Theytus Books, 1991), 75.

[100] Ibid., 90.

[101] Ibid.,99; 106.

Highway's view of the responsibility of the artist with regard to the Native community differs distinctly from other contemporary Native artists. Highway has publicly expressed opinions on art which often produce apprehension and caution within the Native community. Firstly, Highway does not seek community permission, or for that matter, approval. Secondly, he is not afraid to test the boundaries of societal or cultural taboos. And, thirdly, he does not subscribe to the idea of censorship with regard to cultural appropriation. One would be presumptuous, however, to conclude that Highway does not strive for the common communal goal which incorporates the positive progression and betterment of the people. Highway placed his primary emphasis on the role of the artist as an entertainer when he declared:

> My first responsibility as an artist is to entertain. After that my objective is to educate and provoke society to re-examine itself. If you reduce my activities into a nutshell, I am in the business of working toward regaining the dignity for a people for whom simple human dignity has long been owing. [102]

Consequently, it is more accurate to contend that Highway's philosophical approach to achieving the communal goal is divergent and unremitting. He views the artist as a societal critic who, by virtue of his craft, has the responsibility and opportunity to focus on society's short comings and share these observations with the public. For Highway, a great deal of his artistic attention has been placed on the concept of hypocrisy, especially with regards to Catholicism. In response to his attacks on Christianity in *Dry Lips Oughta Move to Kapuskasing*, Highway explained that,

> I think that if society makes certain mistakes, then it's the role of the artist/visionary to tell society that it's made a mistake here, correct it, and then we'll move on. In the particular instance we've been taking about, the Roman Catholic church has made a tremendous error. And it should correct it and then either move on or die. [103]

Therefore, rather than focusing on the positive or less painful aspects of Native culture, Highway has not shied away from exposing the brutal realities entrenched in many Native communities. These include the effects of racism and cultural suppression which have led to corruption, violence, alcoholism, fetal alcoholism, suicide, and homicide. Ultimately, Highway, like Armstrong, proclaims that "the position of an artist is a very serious responsibility" and that the artist has "an opportunity to influence or inspire social change." [104]

---

[102] Kevin Prokosh, "Highway of Hope" Winnipeg Free Press. (20 October 1990), 25.

[103] Robert Enright, "Let Us Now Combine Mythologies: The Theatrical Art of Tomson Highway" Border Crossings. 11-4 (December 1992), 27.

[104] Tomson Highway, *Personal Interview* October 31, 1994. Calgary, Alberta.

Unlike many other Native artists, Highway does not adhere to cultural taboos and tends to view Native cultural tradition as dynamic and both open to and capable of adjustment. In response to a question of cultural taboos, Highway once retorted:

> No, I don't think one should be frightened of violating one's culture. I think that the role of any artist in society is to criticize that society, to force that society to look at its own imperfections. In a sense, the role of the artist is the role of the shaman in traditional, pre-Christian Indian society. Shamans were the visionaries who led that society into the future, who outlined the path that society was to take.
> ... I don't think any religion or any society should be so holy as to be untouchable. I don't think that any icon should be put on a pedestal because once you put it on a pedestal it's too easy to tear down. [105]

In an era in which Native people are struggling to retrieve, retain, and promulgate accurate traditions with respect to ceremony, prayer, and mythology, Highway's views may be considered radical and sometimes unpopular with certain Native groups. The irony in Highway's petition for artistic freedom involves his simultaneous and repetitive summons for cultural revitalization which is connected to his belief in the prophesy of the *Seven Generations*.

The prophesy of the *Seven Generations* is based on the pre-colonial oral literature of some North American indigenous peoples who predicted that the arrival of the Europeans would be followed by seven generations of pain and sorrow . It was also predicted that the birth of the seventh generation would mark the re-birth and revitalization of the people. It is Highway's belief that "we are that seventh generation. ...In this seventh lifetime, we must hope that Native values can regenerate themselves from the rape at the hands of white man's material objects. " [106] Although Highway subscribes to the principle of cultural revitalization, his concept of artistic freedom leaves his adherence to the boundaries of cultural material ambiguous. Therefore, the irony lies in the idea of cultural accuracy versus artistic freedom, especially when an artist's proclaimed intent is culturally didactic. In other words, if Highway claims to be on the path of revitalizing traditional mythology, then radical deviance's from the original myths or the violation of cultural taboos are open to the scrutiny of the Native community. One can speculate that Highway is in fact calling for the revitalization of a contemporary version of the traditional culture: one which has adjusted itself to the contemporary and diverse lives of the people, both urban and rural. Thus, the dilemma of contemporary artists' interpretations of myths and traditions opens itself up to challenge.

---

105 Robert Enright,"Let Us Now Combine Mythologies: The TheatricalAart of Tomson Highway" Border Crossings, 11•4 (December 1992), 27.

106 Denis W. Johnston, "Lines and Circles: The Rez Plays of Tomson Highway" Canadian Literature, 124/125 (Spring/Summer 1990), 263.

Given Highway's view on cultural restrictions, it is not surprising that his view of cultural appropriation is sometimes interpreted as apathetic. It is of interest to note that Highway worked on the development of the screen play for the film version of *Dance Me Outside* by W.P. Kinsella during 1992. Kinsella, of course, stands at the center of the controversy surrounding the appropriation of the Native voice in Canada and is, at best, very unpopular with the Native community. Kinsella's infamous novels such as , *Moccasin Telegraph*, *Dance Me Outside* , and *The Miss Hobbema Pageant* feature a series short stories and are set in a non-fictional Alberta community called Hobbema, which is surrounded by four Cree communities. Kinsella used non-fictional family names, yet announced on several occasions that he had never visited the communities featured in his novels. These novels have been highly criticized by the Native community for depicting and promoting Native stereotypes. On the issue of cultural appropriation and W. P. Kinsella, Highway once remarked that "a writer can write whatever he wants to write about... the only sin a writer can commit is to write badly." [107] In addition, Highway added that as a Native playwright, he is "not uniquely entitled to explore Native experience, but because of a life of cultural extremes, he is uniquely equipped to describe it." [108]

Highway's philosophy in addressing cultural appropriation promotes the ideology of empowerment through the development of a creative Native voice and the promotion and publication of Native writers. Although Highway may be interpreted as apathetic on this issue at times, his actual perspective is one which merely favors creative action rather than intellectual retaliation. In addressing concerns regarding the appropriation of voice during an interview, Highway initially responded quite simply that "there is nothing I can do about it except to keep on writing," and he later provided further elaboration:

> I think that we have to get ourselves in a position of financial control, so that we can decide the style and the way we handle how we are being portrayed rather than the people of Hollywood: for example, *The Last of the Mohicans* or *Princess Pocahontas* - that's not Native. [109]

VI - Criticism / Counter Criticism

After the production of the publicly acclaimed play, *The Rez Sisters*, Highway received great praise from the Native community and the literary critics for having annihilated common stereotypes prevalent within Canadian society. The publication of *The Rez Sisters* provoked statements like:

> Highway is only one writer among many appearing from presses like Theytus in Penticton and Pemmican in Winnipeg whose works are countering the stereotypes,

---

[107] Gordon McLaughlin, "Interview with Tomson Highway" Financial Post and Magazine. (13 January 1992), S10.

[108] Ibid., S10.

[109] Tomson Highway. *Personal Interview*. October 31, 1994, Calgary, Alberta.

> repudiating the idea that reserves contain only miserable and degraded people, all alcoholic and completely dependent on welfare...[110]

> In creating this remarkable clan, Highway has utterly avoided the stereotype of the Indian and shown us another side of Native life - the side that is vital, loving and deeply humourous. More than any other playwright, Highway has shown us how the Indian has managed to survive through centuries of exploitation and neglect. [111]

In The *Rez Sisters*, Highway was successful in negating the common stereotype related to the image of the 'noble savage' which originated during the Romantic period in literature and has emerged in various forms ever since. One specific aspect of the noble savage image involves the concept of death. This stereotype is manifested in character, theme, or plot. Thus audience members or readers are often exposed to a dying race, or a dying culture, or the death of Native characters. By depicting a vibrant and complex community, Highway has systematically avoided this stereotype which is most common among non-Native writers depicting Native people. In the following passage, Highway declared his intent to create a community which opposed stereotypes:

> I'm sure some people went to *Rez* expecting crying and moaning and plenty of misery, reflecting everything they've heard about or witnessed on reserves. They must have been surprised. All that humour and love and optimism, plus the positive values taught by Indian mythology. [112]

Another interesting stereotype noted by critics in contemporary literature is one which revolves around a tiresome theme concerning the loss of cultural identity in the modern world and which is accompanied by Native characters who embark on long soulful journeys in search of a Native identity. This stereotype is perpetuated by both Native and non-Native writers. Tomson Highway has been credited with breaking away from the "search for cultural identity" motif by presenting characters who are firmly and comfortably Native. Their personal struggles go deeper than being Native, and Highway masterfully breathes humanity and vibrancy into his characters. For *The Rez Sisters*, Highway was praised for incorporating fully developed three dimensional characters and was acknowledged in the following critique:

> In Highway's play, the personalities of the Rez Sisters are comfortably complete. None of them experience the anguish and despair of the Indian seeking to find his or her true identity; all these colourful women know who they are. [113]

Ironically, and in contrast to these types of observations on *The Rez Sisters*, Highway was later highly criticized and accused of perpetuating common gender related stereotypes with regards to his

---

110 Margery Fee, "Drama: The Rez Sisters" Malahat Review, 91 (June/Summer 1990), 108.

111 Diane Debenham, "Native People in Contemporary Native Drama" Canadian Drama, 14•2 (1988), 154.

112 Ted Ferguson, "Native Son" Imperial Oil Review, 73•395 (Winter 1989), 22.

113 Diane Debenham, "Native People in Contemporary Native Drama" Canadian Drama, 14•2 (1988),154.

presentation of Native men and women in *Dry Lips*. Critical examination of Highway regarding this issue is extensive; however, it is relevant to examine Highway's overall view on the role of critics in general. Highway retains two contrasting views on the art of criticism: one based on an emotional perspective and one based on an intellectual perspective. For *The Rez Sisters*, Highway received praise from both Native and non-Native critics as well as audience members. However, for *Dry Lips*, Highway received critical acclaim from the artistic community, but the play prompted overwhelming negative responses from Native and non-Native women. From an emotional perspective, Highway claims to have been very hurt by some of the criticism he has received for this *Dry Lips*. He has, on several occasions, expressed both anger and hurt:

> There are a lot of things that occur that can discourage you as with any field. And the spectre of politics eventually does rear its head. And people fight. And people criticize you. And in some cases they criticize you severely - to the point where it really hurts ...It seems that the louder your voices , the wider an audience it reaches, the more of a sitting duck you become. You become that much easier to criticize and pull down. ... My word of advice to young writers, and I hope there will be many, ...the more successful you become, the more critics will be out there, certainly the more fans, but the barbs will hurt. And my one piece of advise, DON' T LET THEM SONS OF BITCHES GET YOU! [114]

While most of the negative response to Highway's plays have originated with Native women, some of whom are his colleagues, it is important to note that although Highway supports the idea of criticism within the theatre, he is extremely sensitive to it. In response to the negative reception of his plays by Native women and other non-Native feminists, Highway remarked:

> I think I could boil it down to two or three women out of a raft of thousands, most of whom are totally in support of and who understand the material. Just because a few women misunderstand, misinterpret, the material is no reason to condemn all of them as being unintelligent, for instance. [115]

Based on this comment, it is apparent that Highway has attributed negative criticism to misinterpretations of both the social motifs in his plays and his intent as a playwright. Negative criticism from non-Native critics tends to be limited to the subject of dramatic structure, and they seem to be cautious about evaluating the content of his plays. This may be due to the fact that the cultural aspects of his plays are essentially exclusive to the Native community, and non-Native critics may choose to avoid the pitfalls surrounding this subject.

---

[114] Carol Grey Eyes, "Interview with Tomson Highway" The Runner, (Spring 1994), 8.

[115] Robert Enright,"Let Us Now Combine Mythologies: The Theatrical Art of Tomson Highway" Border Crossings, 11•4 (December 1992), 27.

In contrast to his emotional view regarding the role of the critic, Highway has also voiced an intellectual perspective on criticism. For example, Highway has, on occasion, stressed the idea of respect for the artists and the hope that critics are knowledgeable about their craft:

> I think that they should criticize people as much as possible. I think critics are necessary. I think we should all be criticized; a little humility never hurt anyone; humility is good. Some (*critics*) of them are very good; some are not very good. They are good if they do their research and work very hard at their craft. Some of them are lousy. But ultimately, it (*criticism*) is very necessary, and I hope there's more critics that really respect their medium and also have respect for the artists who are exercising and exploring their own medium. I hope they have the ability to criticize the material on the basis of the quality of the craft as opposed to the personality of the artist. Some critics can be petty and stupid and don't give a damn about the art. This is wasteful, wasteful energy. [116]

Like many artists, Highway is most favorable to positive criticism and has a tendency to negate the negative. As the forerunner in the emergence of Native theatre in Canada, Highway is most certainly under the scrutiny of both the artistic community and the Native community. Exercising full artistic freedom and meeting the critical acclaim and opposition of both of these communities has and will continue to be an arduous task for many contemporary Native artists. Highway, it seems, has prioritized artistic freedom over community approval.

After reviewing Highway's approach to theatre, it appears that his short-term personal goal focuses on exercising artistic freedom and creativity while expressing his own distinctive voice in the form of theatre. In terms of his long term goal in the theatre, Highway hopes to be an influential figure in the development of a unique aesthetic which combines Native traditions and Western structure: a theatre that is identifiably and distinctly Native, a theatre which is "as unique to Canada as Kabuki theatre is to Japan." [117]

---

116 Tomson Highway, *Personal Interview*. October 31, 1994. Calgary, Alberta.

117 Diane Debenham, "Native People in Contemporary Native Drama" Canadian Drama, 14•2 (1988), 155.

CHAPTER TWO: Trickster Discourse: A Survey of the Analytical Discourse on the Traditional Trickster Figure

The study of the mythology of Native North America has held the interest of scholars for many years. Scholarly pursuits on this subject have inevitably lead to the discovery and exploration of a common cultural archetype generically referred to as the trickster. The trickster figure belongs to the vast library of traditional oral mythology disseminated for thousands of years among Aboriginal people across North America. Collectively, trickster tales are referred as the trickster myth cycle and, when examined as a whole, have been assigned a cyclical structure by most scholars. The mythical content of trickster cycles focuses primarily on the epic adventures of a part human, part supernatural being who explores and thereby defines universal relationships of the physical world within a specific cultural setting. It is the incredible tenacity of the trickster myths and the elusiveness of the trickster figure itself that have attracted the attention of scholars and been the focal point for a variety of mythological studies.

The tenacity of trickster mythology and the trickster figure itself is an indisputable testimony to the cultural authority this mythical icon has within Native societies, past and present. Anthropological, psychological, and sociological studies have concerned themselves with trickster discourse for almost a century. The trickster has captured the attention of some of the most distinguished scholars of our time. Almost every analytic publication on trickster discourse has both inspired and provoked further responsive discourse and scrutiny. The subject has, at times, divided scholars into respective theoretical camps. Ironically, the character who is the focal point of the academic fury and raising chaos in the orderly world of academe, is none other than the elusive trickster. To date, scholars have failed to come to a consensus on the definition of the actual trickster figure, the ultimate function of the trickster myths, and the universal application of the trickster mythology to the human condition.

As the trickster figure is currently re-entering the state of Native existence through contemporary Native art and literature, the exploration of this mythical figure within its original and traditional context merits examination. In modernizing the trickster figure through various forms of art and literature, Native artists, like Tomson Highway, are gradually redefining and re-designing certain attributes of the trickster in order to establish a degree of contemporary cultural relevancy. An examination of both the theoretical discourse and ethnographic collections related to the traditional mythology of the trickster is necessary in order to contemplate its current role within the plays of Tomson Highway and the cultural ramifications this modernized rendition presents when studied in juxtaposition to the traditional trickster. The discourse available on the trickster figure is vast; therefore, only a few of the more influential studies have been selected for analytical purposes. In the exploration of the traditional trickster figure as presented in Native mythology, it is most reasonable to focus more specifically on the Ojibway/Cree trickster figure as this trickster is culturally specific to Highway's own community in Northern Manitoba and is featured in his plays.

I- The Generic Trickster

The term trickster itself is a generic reference which has evolved from a series of scholarly studies. Linguistic references to the trickster figure by different cultural groups verify that the trickster has evolved out of unique cultural circumstances. For various Native groups, the trickster figure is referred to in different, sometimes unrelated, terms and is often presented in a variety physical forms among distinct cultures. For example, among the Blackfeet, the trickster is simply called *Napi* which translates to "Old Man". For the Ojibway, the trickster is referred to as *Nênapós* or *Nanabush*. This term, when translated, is related to the term "great rabbit" or "white hare". [1] For the Cree, the trickster is referred to as *Wîsahkêcâhk* or *Weesageechuk*, a term which, according to some researchers, originates with the Proto-Algonquain parent language and, as a result, remains undefinable. [2] Linguistical terms and physical attributes related to the trickster is evidence enough for some scholars to question the concept of the generic trickster and argue in favor of the development and analysis of culturally unique figures which share some identifiable common traits. In recognition of this concept, certain scholars have cautioned that the mythical figures should not be studied in total isolation from their cultural contexts. In a study on the characteristics of the East African trickster, Kaguru, anthropologist, T.O. Beidelman, called for caution in the application of the general analytical category of the trickster when he stated:

---

[1] Jennifer Brown and Robert Brightman, The Orders of the Dreamed (Manitoba: University of Manitoba Press, 1988), 127.

[2] Ibid., 125.

> I provide no direct solution to the problems posed by the concept of *trickster* , but suggest we abandon the terms and renew analysis from the concerns manifest within each particular society considered. ... I also urge that we avoid global explanatory terms....[3]

Although there are many philosophical theories related to the meaning and the function of the trickster myths, scholars, both Native and non-Native, generally agree that the trickster character possesses several identifiable and fixed traits. Beidelman's comment has been taken into consideration by the more recent folklorists although he also acknowledged the existence of common and identifiable attributes which seem to be fundamental traits in the trickster that have transcended the cultural and temporal boundaries of various tribal peoples. In his identification of trickster-like attributes, Beidelman qualified the use of the term trickster, and explained:

> I include a group of characters that everyone may not agree to call *trickster*, but which exemplify certain forms of supposed disorder and mischief, sometimes even malevolence, though ultimately commenting on morality and order by their play with boundaries and ambiguities of these key subjects. [4]

Despite a series of scholarly studies on the trickster, this mythical figure has evaded a conclusive definitive form. Typically, the trickster, like Native culture, embodies balance between opposite universal forces like good and evil, life and death, order and chaos, creation and destruction, etc. This nature of the trickster has evoked what has been commonly referred to by scholars as the trickster dilemma. This dilemma not only manifests itself in the character of the trickster, but also in the trickster's actions and behaviour within the mythological content. Ironically, it is this nature of the trickster which has attracted and intrigued scholars for many years and has enabled the trickster to function, at one moment, in a diametrically opposed capacity. Well-known trickster commentator, Barbara Babcock-Abrahams, noted:

> The characteristic duality which has given interpreters the greatest difficulty and has engendered the most debate is the coincidence of a trickster and a culture hero or the merging of the human or animal and the divine, the secular and the sacred in a single figure, particularly in the tribal mythology of North American Indians. [5]

---

[3] T.O. Beidelman, "The Moral Imagination of the Kaguru: Some Thoughts on Tricksters, Translation, and Comparative Analysis" American Ethnologist, (American Anthropological Association, 1980), 28.

[4] Ibid., 28.

[5] Barbara Babcock-Abrahams,"A Tolerated Margin of Mess: The Trickster Tales Reconsidered" Journal of the Folklore Institute, 11 (1974-75), 162.

Within the trickster, one discovers a series of dual characteristics which are reflective of his role within society and his relationship to the human condition. In discussing the paradox of the trickster, Babcock-Abrahams also surmised:

> The most important characteristics of these dualisms, however, is their expression of the ambiguity and paradox, of a confusion of all customary categories. The clown or trickster epitomizes the paradox of the human condition and exploits the incongruity that we are creatures of the earth and yet not wholly creatures of the earth ... Further, he embodies the fundamental contradiction of our existence: the contradiction between the individual and society, between freedom and constraint. [6]

For Native people, the analysis of the trickster as a paradoxical figure is secondary to the presentation and existence of the mythology itself. Basil Johnston, an Ojibway scholar, simplified the trickster dilemma and attributed Nanabush's paradoxical behaviour to the fact that he is, by virtue of his birth, both a supernatural being and a human being. On this subject, Johnston explained:

> Nanabush was a paradox. On the one hand, he was a supernatural being possessing supernatural powers; on the other hand, he was the son of a mortal woman subject to the need to learn. [7]

Johnston's simplistic explanation of the trickster paradox offers an academically uncontaminated perspective. His rationalization is based entirely on the Ojibway trickster's mythical existence and history contained therein. Thus, the paradoxical dilemma of the trickster has been more problematic for scholars who have attempted to generically define a North American trickster without taking various tribal perspectives of the origin of various tribal tricksters into account. Tribal specifics such as the trickster's birth, kinship, gender, and degree of supernatural power vary from one Native group to another and have a definite influence on how the trickster is perceived within a particular community.

The Winnebago trickster cycle has been the primary resource document for a great deal of trickster discourse. This cycle, one the most accessible and complete collections of trickster mythology, has been made available to the Western academic world by Paul Radin. From this cycle in particular, an accumulation of academic discourse has contributed to a gradual orchestration of general theories about the trickster. This, of course, has presented obvious problems as most of these studies do not account for the fact that the trickster mythology itself is not a literary art but rather an oral art dependent on oral presentation. Oral presentation by its very nature contains many context variables like the interpretation of the storyteller or outside cultural influences which may effect the content of

---

[6] Ibid., 161.

[7] Basil Johnston, Ojibway Heritage (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1974), 159.

the myths. In commenting on the presentation of trickster mythology in a written format, Robert Sayre, a critic of Radin's collection, observed:

> When a story is written down, it is necessarily more fixed. The beauty of oral literature is that it moves. Moving its audience and moving with them, changing and turning like a path, it cannot be stopped forever in one form.. As Eugene Rave said of Radin's printed Trickster cycle, "it is frozen." [8]

In this light, generic classifications, which are based on the written collections of myths, do not account for specific tribal anecdote, interpretations, and perceptions of the trickster. However, it is possible to identify some basic or fixed attributes of the trickster icon which can be generically applied to most, but not all, tribal tricksters. It is also possible to identify more fluid attributes of the trickster icon which are those that tend to differ from one tribal mythology to another or which may have evolved and changed within specific tribal mythology over a period of time due to outside influences and traumatic cultural change. Before delving into the attributes of the trickster, it may be valuable to examine some of the more influential dissertations on the trickster figure.

II - Overview of Trickster Discourse

Some of the most notable and influential scholars on trickster discourse include: Franz Boas, Paul Radin in collaboration with Carl Jung, and Barbara Babcock-Abrahams. In 1898, anthropologist, Franz Boas, noted for collecting and transcribing folklore among the coastal tribes in British Columbia, published a popular supposition on the trickster. In his introduction to *Traditions of the Thompson River Indians of British Columbia* by James Teit, Boas proposed that the trickster figure, as it exists in tribal literature, is the product of the cultural and spiritual evolution of the people. Boas avoided the attempt to unite the paradoxical qualities of the trickster into one character, which, for him, solved the paradoxical trickster dilemma. In doing so, he suggested that the trickster is actually two different types of culture hero characters: the egoist transformer and the altruistic transformer. [9] The original and most common culture hero, according to Boas, is the egoist transformer. By virtue of his creative and selfish actions, this supernatural being transforms the earth into its present shape. His motives are not altruistic, and his transformations, whether beneficial or detrimental to mankind, are simply incidental. [10] Boas stated that once we accept that this mythological character "is not considered by the Indians as an altruistic being but as an egoist pure and simple" then the paradoxical dilemma disappears. Boas also suggested that the myths containing an altruistic transformer are actually the end

---

[8] Robert F. Sayre, "Trickster" North Dakota Quarterly , 53•2 (Spring 1985), 73.

[9] Franz Boas , Introduction. Traditions of the Thompson River Indians of British Columbia by James Teit (New York: The American Folklore Society/ Houghton, Mifflin and Company, 1898), 9.

[10] Ibid., 7.

result of a gradual evolutionary process beginning with the egoist transformer. [11] He attributed this transition to the developmental changes which occurred in Native societies during colonialization. Boas surmised:

> It seems quite intelligible that with the progress of society there should develop a tendency of substituting for the coarse motives of the primitive transformer to higher ones. With the consciousness that the changes effected by the transformer were useful, man may have developed the idea that they were made with the view of benefiting mankind. [12]

He concluded that the trickster is actually two separate characters: the Trickster- Transformer, which is the original egoist transformer, and the Culture Hero, which is the more highly developed altruistic transformer. Boas also concluded that these two figures are the product of three distinct stages of character evolution which began with the egoist transformer, (the Trickster-Transformer), followed by the combination of the egoist and altruistic transformer (the Trickster-Transformer/Culture Hero), and finally, the pure altruistic transformer (the Culture Hero). Boas' theory on the character evolution of trickster has been and continues to be widely accepted and adopted by other scholars.

Following Boas, one of the most prominent and comprehensive academic documents produced on the trickster figure is a collection of Winnebago trickster myths by Paul Radin, accompanied by analytic essays by Karl Kerenyi and Carl Jung. The original edition of Radin's book titled, *The Trickster: A Study in American Indian Mythology*, was first published in 1956. The trickster myths included in the book are a result of Radin's ethnographic research and collaboration with Winnebago tribal member, Sam Blowsnake. Blowsnake apparently obtained the myths in 1912 from a Native elder near Winnebago, Nebraska. [13] In addition to his own suppositional papers, the inclusion of Carl Jung's essay titled, *On the Psychology of the Trickster Figure*, has made Radin's book a pivotal academic contribution to the study of Native mythology. Jung's essay, in particular, has been used as a type of spring board for the academic exploration of the trickster topic. Radin and Jung's view of the trickster as well as Radin's methodology in the collection and translation of the myths has been the subject of more recent academic scrutiny.

Both Radin and Jung subscribe to the concept that the trickster figure is the symbolic representation of the collective unconscious, reminiscent of a primal psychological stage in the development of mankind. Jung's argumentative foundation relies of the theory that all mythical figures, "correspond to inner psychic experiences," and that the collective figure, "gradually breaks up

---

[11] Ibid., 9
[12] Ibid., 10.
[13] Robert F. Sayre, "Trickster" North Dakota Quarterly , 53•2 (Spring 1985), 72.

under the impact of civilization, leaving traces in folklore which are difficult to recognize." [14] Jung refers to the trickster as the collective shadow figure which is reminiscent of primitive man and, therefore, representative of the instinctual and universal characteristics of all mankind. For Jung, the trickster's progressive adventures are a metaphorical re-enactment of man's emergence from a collective unconscious existence to an ego-conscious existence. In addition, Jung proposed that it was only when Native people reached a higher state of consciousness that they were able to collectively, "detach the earlier state" from themselves and "objectify it" through mythology. [15] In defining the trickster, he surmised:

> He is obviously a 'psychologem', an archetypal psychic structure of extreme antiquity. In his clearest manifestations, he is a faithful copy of an absolutely undifferentiated human consciousness, corresponding to a psyche that has hardly left the animal level. [16]

Jung attributed the longevity and survival of the myths to the idea that "repressed contents" have "the best chance of survival," and that the myths themselves remain "pleasurable" and are, thereby, "not conducive to repression." [17] Although Jung's perspective of the trickster has been employed by many scholars, his analysis clearly lacks cultural insight. For example, he attributes the sexual content and visceral humour of the myths to an "earlier low intellectual and moral level." [18] In analyzing Radin's translation of the trickster from a purely psychological perspective, Jung fails to address pertinent culturally specific topics like the humour, linguistics, spirituality, and world view of Native people. In addition, Jung's discourse is based only on one tribal collection of Native myths as translated, presented, and edited by Paul Radin. It is from this secondary ethnographic version of a specific trickster figure belonging to the Winnebago tribe that Jung produced a thesis on tricksters in general.

Radin expanded on Jung's psychological analysis when he suggested that the trickster also represents the evolutionary maturation of mankind. As a result, Radin's structural arrangement of the myths in his collection employs a psychological evolution which traces the trickster through sexual and emotional maturation. This maturation, according to Radin, represents, "man's struggle with himself and with a world in which he had been thrust without his volition and consent" and that the trickster demonstrates man as "gradually evolving from an amorphous, instinctual, and unintegrated being into

---

[14] Carl Jung. "On the Psychology of the Trickster Figure" in The Trickster by Paul Radin. (New York: Schocken Books, 1972), 195, 202.

[15] Ibid.,202.

[16] Ibid., 200.

[17] Ibid., 204, 205

[18] Ibid., 207.

one with the lineaments of man and one foreshadowing man's psychical traits." [19] At one point in the center of the myth cycle, Radin was unable to apply his evolutionary analysis and simply concluded that, "from a literary and psychological point of view, our myth cycle breaks down after incident 26." [20] Radin's failure to recognize structural development beyond his psychological formula has been the focus of further critical discourse. In addition to what may or may not be an imposed structure, Radin has also been accused of exercising censorship in the translation of the myths in order to conform to the publishing practices of the 1950's. As trickster commentator Robert Sayre explained:

> The complicated publication history illustrates the difficulties which Radin and other anthropologists had with these stories. They were like banned books, obscene and secret apocrypha only for professional circulation. The editor-collectors did not know what or how to translate the stories, especially the parts having to do with, to use Radin's words, "excrement", "breaking wind", "penis", and "vulva". Such words are safely scientific. But they also gave the translation a tone which is hardly humorous or colloquial. On the other hand, volleys of English four-letter words wouldn't have been quite appropriate either, since they would have given the stories a smutty or risqué tone they never had to their Indian audience. [21]

The very nature of translation of the myths from their original language to European languages is problematic for any scholar. For his efforts, Radin must continue to be acknowledged for his attempt to translate and edit highly metaphorical material from one language and mode of transmission into another without the loss of content and meaning. However, both Jung and Radin's psychologically analytical approach to the edited version of the Winnebago trickster myths has been and will continue to be the focus of scrutiny and subsequent study.

Another well noted and more recent scholar on trickster discourse is Barbara Babcock-Abrahams. In Babcock-Abrahams' thorough analysis of the trickster titled, *A Tolerated Margin of Mess: The Trickster and his Tales Reconsidered,* she rejected the Jungian theory that the trickster is a reflection of a primitive collective unconscious and maintained that the trickster is simply a representation of man's desire to escape and challenge the religious, cultural, and political boundaries of society. In her study, Babcock- Abrahams proposed that the primary and essential characteristic of the trickster is his "marginal" domain, and that the trickster's power is derived from his "ability to live interstitially." [22] Furthermore, she views the trickster as an "outsider", who's marginality is responsible for his ambiguous and paradoxical nature which secures his ability to objectively satirize society and

---

19 Paul Radin, The Trickster: A Study in American Indian Mythology (New York: Schocken Books, 1972),xxiv; 133.

20 Ibid., 141

21 Robert F. Sayre, "Trickster" North Dakota Quarterly , 53•2 (Spring 1985), 72.

22 Barbara Babcock-Abrahams,"A Tolerated Margin of Mess: The Trickster Tales Reconsidered" Journal of the Folklore Institute, 11 (1974-75), 148.

challenge societal structure. For these reasons, the trickster character, according to Babcock-Abrahams, is congruent with the threat of societal chaos. On this subject, she concluded that

> While trickster's power endows his group with vitality and other boons, it also carries the threat and the possibility of chaos. His beneficence, though central, results from breaking of rules and the violating of taboos. He is, therefore, polluting and must remain marginal and peripheral, forever betwixt and between. As a "criminal" culture-hero, he embodies all possibilities - the most positive and the most negative - and is a paradox personified. [23]

In the above passage, Babcock-Abrahams assesses the marginality of the trickster as an essential component to the function of the trickster myths. Furthermore, her analysis of the trickster follows a socio- cultural perspective rather than the psychological perspective as proposed by Jung and Radin. She also defines the trickster as a "picaresque" type figure and explained that the primary objective of trickster myths involves social satire. Her theory is best described in the following statement:

> The main interests of the picaresque fiction are social and satirical, and the picaro or rogue whose adventures it relates in episodic fashion tends to be peripatetic because he is "fleeing from, looking for, or passing through" some aspect of society. Through his trickery, that is his negations and violations of custom, he condemns himself to contingency and unpredictability. [24]

Consequently, Babcock-Abrahams supposition, when examined in relation to the myth cycle, holds merit. In the traditional myths, the trickster' s interaction with various societies, whether they be human or animal, begins primarily on an "intruder level." Similarly, the traditional trickster does not remain connected to any particular societal structure, and his adventurous continuity relies on the maintenance of a transitory existence. Unlike Radin, her analysis does not rely on the sequential order of individual myths within the cycle as proposed by Radin. In correspondence to Babcock-Abraham's socio-cultural analysis, Martha B. Kendell, who edited a collection of traditional trickster myths titled, *Coyote Stories II*, summarized the purpose of the trickster figure in mythology as follows:

> Trickster figures are artful devices storytellers use to contrast social ideals (order) with social experience (disorder, ambiguity): they are ways of getting an audience to reflect on the conflicts between morality and everyday life. [25]

III - Trickster Attributes

One of the problems which some scholars have attempted to overcome in analyzing Native trickster mythology involves the different versions of the trickster and trickster tales across North America. Differences in the overall trickster mythology are most pronounced in the physical

---

[23] Ibid, 148.

[24] Ibid, 159.

[25] Martha B. Kendell, Native American Texts Series: Coyote II. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980, p. 1.

appearances of the tribal tricksters and details within the plot lines of each story unit. Generally, however, the identifiable and mutual similarities which exist between trickster cycles tend to be most apparent in the fundamental attributes of the trickster and the nature of the collective mythology. Most scholars have identified and agreed upon some standard character attributes of various trickster figures from different tribal groups. After reviewing a great deal of discourse on the trickster and collected editions of trickster mythology, the following can be identified as generically fixed trickster attributes which most scholars have observed:

1) an insatiable appetite for food,
2) an insatiable libido,
3) often imperfect, yet creative powers
4) physical transformation abilities
4) distorted sexual genitals,
5) a combination of human and spiritual lineage or origin,
6) a transitory existence between and within the spiritual and physical worlds,
7) paradoxical characteristics which include: good/evil, creator/destroyer, order/disorder or chaos, and divinity/humanity,
8) immortality,
9) carnal and visceral humour

These fixed traits are standard and seem to have remained intact for most Native groups despite social metamorphosis and cultural suppression. Libidinous and visceral topics are a part of the general humour predominant within trickster mythology. It should be noted that the indoctrination of Christianity has perpetuated censorship of the sometimes explicit and grotesque aspects of the trickster. Therefore, although sexual grotesqueness and visceral humour are identified as fixed trickster attributes, these aspects of the myths have been exposed to various degrees of censorship, yet they have continued to be acknowledged and maintained as standard traits through ethnography and/or underground storytelling practices within certain communities.

Humour is an intricate aspect of trickster mythology. The humour contained within trickster mythology is complex and culturally distinct. Many scholars have had difficulty in both the interpretation and cognition of the humour due to the fact that it often evades external analysis when removed from its cultural and community context. Although the more contemporary scholars are aware of this enigma, many of the early scholars attempted to translate and analyze the humour in the myths from a Western perspective and ultimately contended that the humour within the myths was simply "obscene", "crude" or "primitive"..[26] The imperfections of the earlier studies of trickster mythology can be directly associated with the interpretation of Indian humour influenced by an inhibiting sense of Western ethnocentricity which resulted in establishing a scholarly assumption of primitiveness.

---

[26] Robert F. Sayre, "Trickster" North Dakota Quarterly , 53•2 (Spring 1985), 73

The most explicit aspects of trickster humour can be classified in its broadest sense as visceral and libidinous, and yet the purpose and function of the humour embodies a high degree of complexity as it relates in theory to the realm of semiotics. The explicitness of trickster mythology is secondary to the metaphorical and didactic messages presented in the myths. Comedic symbolism and metaphorical material which reinforces custom and universal truths is rampant in trickster mythology. Native writer, Gerald Vizenor proposed that the trickster is a semiotic sign and that as such trickster humour represents comic liberation. On this subject, he contended:

> Freedom is a sign, and the trickster is chance and freedom in a comic sign; comic freedom is a "doing" not an essence, not a museum being, or an aesthetic presence. The trickster, as a semiotic sign, is imagined in narrative voices, a communal rein to the unconscious, which is comic liberation; however, the trickster is outside comic structure , "making it" comic rather than "inside comedy, being it" The trickster is agnostic imagination and aggressive liberation, a "doing" in narrative points of view, and outside the imposed structures. [27]

Vizenor's supposition on trickster humour is similar to Babcock-Abrahams in that both scholars subscribe to the concept that the purpose of the humour is to violate or challenge boundaries. This concept for Babcock-Abrahams, however, is closely tied to her supposition on the essential "marginal" domain of the trickster. On the subject of humour, Babcock-Abrahams suggested:

> In contrast to the scapegoat or tragic victim, trickster belongs to the comic modality or marginality where violation is generally the precondition for laughter and communitas, and there tends to be an incorporation of the outsider, a leveling of hierarchy, a reversal of status's. [28]

The trickster's violation of boundaries for Babcock-Abrahams may very well lead to the liberation as proposed by Vizenor. In addition, the humour in the myths is an innate part of the trickster's marginal domain which cultivates his freedom to violate taboos. There are many studies which contemplate the function of humour within the Native community in general and trickster mythology in specific. In his study, Andrew Wiget summarized trickster humour when he stated:

> The trickster is the embodiment of humour - all kinds of humour. He plays trickster on others. He ridicules sacred customs, he breaks taboos, he boasts when he should blush, he is the world's greatest clown, and he can laugh at himself. For the religious viewpoint which the trickster represents, laughter has a religious value and function. In laughing at the incredible antics of the trickster, the people laugh at themselves. The myths of the trickster enabled the Indians to laugh off their failures in hunting, in fighting, in romance, and in combating the limitations imposed upon them by their environment. [29]

---

[27] Gerald Vizenor, "Trickster Discourse" American Indian Quarterly. 14 (Summer 1990), 285.

[28] Barbara Babcock-Abrahams,"A Tolerated Margin of Mess: The Trickster Tales Reconsidered" Journal of the Folklore Institute, 11 (1974-75), 153.

[29] Mac Linscott Ricketts, "The North American Indian Trickster" History of Religions, 5 (1965-66), 347.

As pointed out by Wiget, trickster humour is multi-faceted, and the visceral and carnal humour are only two aspects of trickster comedy. Due to the censorship surrounding these portions of the myths, some Native communities may have lost touch with the carnal humour of the trickster altogether. However, this type of humour provides a magical balance between didactic purpose and engaging entertainment. This formula is responsible for the tenacity and overall power of the content and meaning of the myths. The trickster's most popular and comedic mishaps in the traditional mythology occur between his anus, his penis, and his will. The character, like human beings, is unable, despite his power and pride, to control his natural bodily functions. It is these very natural functions which humble the trickster, wreak havoc on the earth, and often reduce his ultra-ego into its rightful humble place. In one of the more common myths, the trickster awakens to find his blankets flying above his head. He eventually discovers that his oversized erect penis is responsible. In fact, he finds that his penis is so big that he must carry it in a box in front of him as he travels. He eventually looses control of his erect penis, and the penis swims across a river and engages in intercourse with the daughter of a chief. In another myth, the trickster requests his anus to guard his captured game while he sleeps; in most of these myths the game is usually some type of bird. When he awakens, his game has disappeared, and he punishes his anus by sitting atop the fire. In yet another, the trickster eats a root which he has been warned not to eat, and he soon discovers that he has consumed a powerful laxative. He begins to fart uncontrollably until he eventually defecates all over the earth.

In addition to the fixed traits of the trickster, there are also traits which seem to be more difficult for scholars to define and standardize in a generic fashion. It is at this point where it is valuable to revert back to T.O. Beidelman's caution against the generic trickster, and his theory that, "we should try to relate attributes and actions of tricksters and similar figures to different and shifting roles and values within particular societies." [30] Trickster mythology has a tendency, if not a purpose, to reflect or mirror the society from which it is born and orally presented or brought to life. As such, the attributes of the trickster have often been adapted and plot lines have been noted to have changed in order to accommodate more stories, influences from other tribes, or a trickster which is more acceptable to the people. Thus, it is necessary to identify the more fluid traits of the trickster characters. Fluid traits are those which have been exposed to alterations over a certain period of time or simply vary from one community to another. The alteration of trickster attributes seems to be dependent on and reflective of the dynamics and conventions of the given society or on the attempt to apply general definitions to trickster figures across North America. The most notable fluid traits of the trickster include the character's divine status and gender identification.

---

[30] T.O. Beidelman, "The Moral Imagination of the Kaguru: Some Thoughts on Tricksters, Translation, and Comparative Analysis" American Ethnologist. (American Anthropological Association, 1980),38

In some trickster myth cycles, the nature of the divinity of the trickster appears to have gradually changed from an egocentric to a more philanthropic type of deity. Although Franz Boas attributed this change to the process of civilization, it is also probable that the nature of the divinity of the trickster may have been altered purposefully by the storytellers as a means to compete with the more altruistic deities presented to Native people through Christianity. Ojibway writer Basil Johnston's character description of the trickster clearly leaned towards the more modern philanthropic trickster interpretation when he stated that Nanabush's purpose on earth is "to teach the Anishnabeg, to help the weak, and to heal the sick. "[31] Evidently, some scholars have proposed that the myths which depict the trickster as an altruistic deity are not a part of the original myths and should not be studied as a part of the trickster cycle. Folklorist, Brian Street, noted:

> ...originally Wakdjunkaga (the trickster) was not a deity. In those myths where he has divine traits, it is a result of conscious and deliberate remodeling by a priest thinker. ...divine traits intrude on the original story. [32]

Street's opinion on the "intrusion" of divine traits is interesting as he simultaneously insinuates a more serious intrusion: that of Christianity and Christian mythology. However, if all the trickster tales containing the divine trickster or the "altruistic trickster" traits were edited from the trickster cycles, then the cycles would no longer relate and reflect "the shifting roles and values" which were and have affected the given Native societies from which these tales developed. Therefore, it appears that the nature of trickster's divinity is fluid and changes reflect exposure to extra-cultural and religious influences.

Another trait of the trickster which is fluid, in the sense that it avoids generic classification, is gender identification. It should be noted that in most Native languages gender terms tend to be governed more by kinship roles rather than sexual genitalia and function. The gender of the trickster has been a somewhat problematic issue for scholars attempting to study the trickster from a generic perspective. Generally, the trickster is predominately male: a brother, a son, a father, and a grandfather. However, for some South Western Native people, the trickster may be female. In addition, some Native tribes in Southwestern United States have two trickster-like icons: one male and one female. In these circumstances, the female trickster character functions as a secondary antagonistic character which further enhances and defines the primary male trickster. On the subject of trickster gender, Andrew Wiget noted the following:

> Female tricksters are known in North American traditional literatures, however, and their occurrence does not seem to depend on the sex of the storyteller or audience or

---

31 Basil Johnston, Ojibway Heritage (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1974), 159.

32 Brian V. Street, "The Trickster Theme: Winnebago and Azande" Zande Themes (ed) Andre Singer and Brain V. Street (Great Britian: Basil Blackwell, 1972), 95.

> even particular contexts. Thus, at least in some societies, a female trickster was a commonly understood, unexceptional figure, whose character is contrasted with that of the male. [33]

Wiget provided examples of the Coyote Woman trickster among the Tewa people in Arizona, and a female version of the trickster among the Hopi. [34] As a result of these variations, the gender of the trickster in tradition mythology is fluid in a generic sense, but may be fixed within each tribal group in accordance to their own tribal mythology.

IV - The Traditional Cree/Ojibway Trickster

In his plays, Highway uses the Ojibway term, *Nanabush*, since his fictional community is a typically mixed Cree/Ojibway community on Manitoulan Island. [35] Highway's own community, situated near Brochet, Manitoba, is Cree, and the trickster is referred to as *Weesageechuk*. This community has been categorized by historians and linguists as part of the Rock Cree tribal affiliate. [36] The relationship between the Ojibway trickster, *Nanabush*, and the Cree trickster, *Weesageechuk*, is complicated and rooted in various linguistic developments and geographical migration patterns of Algonquain speaking people throughout Northern Ontario, Manitoba, and Saskatchewan. Although the trickster character is quite similar, the origin and plot detail in the trickster myths for the Cree and Ojibway people are different . In some Northern communities, the term Nanabush and Weesageechuk are used interchangeable among the Cree and Ojibway people, and the mythological content may overlap. In terms of the overall purpose of the myths, Kimberly Echlin noted that "underlying the magic of these episodes are several central precepts of Ojibway life. "[37]

The tales surrounding the birth and origin of the Cree and Ojibway trickster merit examination as they assist in establishing an identity which is acceptable and acknowledged by the people for this particular trickster. The mythical account of the trickster's birth varies in plot detail from one community to another across the Ojibway and Cree territories. In her dissertation study titled, *The Translation of Ojibway: The Nanabush Myths*, Kimberly Echlin noted that there are several variations about the birth of Nanabush and that, "in some, twins are born and in others, three boys are born. Nanabush is a special being from birth - his father is the wind, he is not named in ceremony but at

---

33 Andrew Wiget, " His Life in his Tail: The Native American Trickster and the Literature of Possibility" Redefining American Literary History (ed) LaVonne Brown Ruoff and Jerry W. Ward Jr., (New York: The Modern Language Association of America, 1990), 42

34 Ibid., 89

35 Tomson Highway. *Personal Interview* (Calgary, Alberta: October 31, 1994).

36 Jennifer Brown and Robert Brightman. The Orders of the Dreamed (Manitoba: University of Manitoba Press, 1988), 32.

37 Kimberly Echlin, The Translation of Ojibway: The Nanabush Myths (Toronto: York University, 1982), 62.

birth speaks his own name." [38] In order to establish the context of the trickster figure modified and incorporated by Highway within his plays, it is useful to examine a Cree version of the traditional trickster's birth myth recorded in 1823 as well as an Ojibway version recounted by Native writer, Basil Johnston.

One of the most extensive ethnographic collection concerning the spiritual practices and mythology of the Ojibway/Cree people in Northern Manitoba and Saskatchewan was recorded by fur-trader, George Nelson. [39] The Hudson Bay clerk's detailed journals and manuscripts are reflective of his experiences among the Cree/Ojibway people from 1802-1823. Nelson's writings have been considered by both Native and non-Native scholars to be "invaluable" contributions due to "his attention to detail and eagerness for accuracy.". [40] He was also noted for his willingness to "listen seriously and with a relatively open mind to what his Ojibway and Cree associates had to tell him." [41] Nelson provided a fairly accurate account of the trickster mythology as recited to him during this period, and his manuscripts are especially valuable to this study as they provide access to the mythology of group of the "Rock Cree" people residing at Lac La Ronge in Northern Saskatchewan during 1823. This particular community is linguistically connected in dialect to the Cree people residing near Maria Lake in Northern Manitoba, which is Highway's community. Although Nelson's recording of the myths from Lac La Ronge may differ from some Northern Cree communities, the birth of Weesageechuk does not appear in subsequent ethnographic studies executed during the 1970's. [42] It is probable that some aspects of the trickster myths may have been lost over a period of time. Therefore, it is also probable that the Weesageechuk origin myth recorded by Nelson in 1823 may have shared common motifs with other Cree communities in Northern Manitoba during this same period.

Nelson's account of the origin of Weesageechuk was told to him in 1823. Variances in the Cree mythology across Northern Canada are common, and this particular community's trickster myths are noted for the borrowing of Ojibway trickster motifs. Essentially, however, Nelson's recorded account of the origin myth is predominantly Cree in nature and content. In this version, Weesageechuk is one of two sons born to the only daughter of the North Wind. The wife of the North Wind and the impregnator of Weesageechuk's mother in this account are unnamed, and the conception is somewhat

---

[38] Ibid.,14-15.

[39] Nelson's manuscripts were recently published by the University of Manitoba press in a collection edited and transcribed by Jennifer Brown and Robert Brightman titled, *The Orders of the Dreamed: George Nelson on Cree and Northern Ojibwa Religions and Myth, 1823*.

[40] Jennifer Brown and Robert Brightman. The Orders of the Dreamed (Manitoba: University of Manitoba Press, 1988), 3

[41] Ibid., 3.

[42] Ibid.,130.

immaculate. [43] Weesageechuk's younger brother, *Mishabose*, dies at the hands of the Great Water Lynxes later in the mythology. The trickster, after successfully completing the ceremonies of manhood, later seeks revenge and destroys the water monsters. [44] In this account of the birth and early life of Weesageechuk, the Cree trickster is assigned a lineage which clearly connects the mythical figure to the spirit world via the North Wind. In summary, Nelson's version of the birth of Weesageechuk reflects a Cree myth with Ojibway overtones.

Basil Johnston, an Ojibway writer, included a fairly detailed version of an Ojibway account of Nanabush's birth in his book titled *Ojibway Heritage*. [45] Johnston's version of the myth is both similar to and different from Nelson's. Like Nelson's version, Johnston's account of the Nanabush myths establishes a powerful lineage which relates the Ojibway trickster to both the immortal and mortal world, and Nanabush is thereby both an Anishnabeg (human being) and an incorporeal being. Like Nelson's version the Ojibway trickster has siblings; however, he is one of four sons rather than two and is born to a legendary mortal women, *Winonah*, and an immortal spirit called, *Epingishmook*.[46] In these accounts, Nanabush's brothers stay on earth for a short period and then retire to the spiritual world toward the west wind. [47] Winonah is said to have been deserted by her spirit husband shortly after Nanabush's birth and, subsequently, died of heartbreak. After fulfilling the rites of manhood, Nanabush seeks revenge on his father for causing his mother's death. In another Ojibway version, recorded by Kimberly Echlin in her dissertation study, the impregnators of the mortal woman, (Nanabush's mother), are referred are to as *Manidoo-beings*, and the woman dies in child birth as the four brothers struggle to be the first born. [48] Subsequently, Nanabush is raised by his grandmother, and his siblings disappear. Nanabush later embarks on a quest to avenge his mother's death and declares war on his brothers who are also supernatural beings.

Although the tales may differ significantly in the plot details, what is most important and fundamentally common in the Cree and Ojibway myths regarding the birth of the trickster is the establishment of the trickster as a partially human, partially incorporeal being and as a male. Through his lineage, the trickster has been assigned a supernatural kinship; this kinship provides a reference

---

43 Given the immaculate conception motif in this version of the myth, it is probable that Christianity may have already had some influencial impact on the trickster myths during the early 19th century.

44 Jennifer Brown and Robert Brightman, The Orders of the Dreamed (Manitoba: University of Manitoba Press, 1988), 45

45 Some of Basil Johnston's most notable literary contributions include: *Indian School Days*, (1988), *Moose Meat and Wild Rice*, (1978), *Ojibway Heritage*, (1976), and *Ojibway Ceremonies*, (1978), *Tales the Elders Told*, (1981)

46 Basil Johnston, Ojibway Heritage (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1974), 150-151

47 Ibid., 153.

48 Kimberly Echlin, The Translation of Ojibway: The Nanabush Myths (Toronto: York University, 1982), 13.

base for the divinity of the trickster as well as a relationship and interaction with the cosmic and the physical world. Via the myths which account for the birth and early of life of Nanabush, both the Ojibway and Cree tricksters are assigned fixed male genders. It is this type of trickster which these tribal people have come to know, understand, and recognize as their spiritual brother. The following passage by Native writer, Marie Anneharte Baker, is reflective of the familiarity established between the Ojibway people and their trickster:

> For the Anishinabeg, Nanabush had a lineage. Like a classical Greek or Shakespearean actor, he attempts to kill his father, the male authority symbol. As a grandma's boy, he has to come to terms with male-dominated culture by trying to do away with his dad. [49]

Contemporary interpretations of the trickster have clearly become distorted as the trickster is removed from mythical context and traditional storytelling mode of transmission. The most common distortions have affected the divinity and gender of the trickster. Over a period of time, there has been some confusion between the trickster character and the supreme being. Originally, confusion occurred as a result of mis-interpretations on behalf of non-Native ethnographers. In his manuscripts, George Nelson initially confused the two deities and originally misinterpreted the trickster as *Kisêmanitô* (the Ojibway supreme being). [50] Nelson later corrected his error and stated that "they acknowledge a superior power, not Weesuckajock, as I was erroneously informed."[51] Similarly, contemporary Native writers have acquired a tendency to define the trickster in comparison and contrast to the Christ figure in Christianity. Originally, this compare and contrast context was useful in conveying and defining the trickster's importance within Native culture for the benefit of a contemporary society. However, writers like Highway have gradually started to elevate the divinity of the trickster to the equivalent status of the Native version of God. In an interview in 1992, Highway claimed that "I think God is ultimately Nanabush, and by extension what he/she represents. God, the Great Spirit, whatever you wish to call this being. " [52] In the traditional mythology and primary analysis thereof, Nanabush is clearly not the ultimate supreme being. He is not God or the Great Spirit, and he is not worshipped in that manner. Rather the trickster is more accurately interpreted as an part-human, part-incorporeal being who, by virtue of his interactions, adventures, and creative powers, renovates the physical state of earth which has been a benefit of mankind. The following statement by Johnston places the trickster into an appropriate context in terms of both his status as a deity as well as his relationship to the Creator and human beings:

---

[49] Marie Annharte-Baker, "An Old Inidan Trick is to Laugh" Canadian Theatre Review, 68 (Fall, 1991), 49.

[50] Jennifer Brown and Robert Brightman, The Orders of the Dreamed (Manitoba: University of Manitoba Press, 1988), 36

[51] Ibid.,81.

[52] Robert Enright, "Let Us Now Combine Mythologies: The Theatrical Art of Tomson Highway" Border Crossings 11•4 (December, 1992), 27.

> He could be human, but in nature and essence was a spirit. Yet he was not a god. Though he had vast powers he was not considered the equal of Kitche Manitou. Rather Nanabush was a messenger of Kitche Manitou; and intermediary on earth between different species of beings; and, an advocate for the Anishnabeg.[53]

The birth of Nanabush is important for the Ojibway and the Cree as it explains and establishes the unpredictable behaviour and the flaws in the supernatural powers of Nanabush. With regards to his human attributes, Johnston summarized the trickster's relationship to the people in the following statement:

> As an Anishnabe, Nanabush was human, noble, strong, or ignoble and weak. For his attributes strong and weak, the Anishnabeg came to love and understand Nanabush. They saw in him, themselves. In his conduct was reflected the character of men and women, young and old. From Nanabush, although he was a paradox, physical and spirit being, doing good and unable to attain it, the Anishnabeg learned. For his teachings, they honoured Nanabush. [54]

With regards to his supernatural lineage, Johnston noted a great deal of respect for Nanabush. However, he also acknowledged that the human/divine paradox within the trickster ultimately placed limitations and restrictions on the trickster's divine status and supernatural powers:

> Nanabush was essentially an incorporeal being, even when he assumed a physical form. Though transformation seemed complete in a physical mode, it was never compete in the incorporeal sense. It was never perfect. It was this aspect that made Nanabush a human, most unlike an incorporeal being. It a was human ideals of courage, generosity, resourcefulness, kindness that made him lovable; as it was human limitation of ineptitude, indecisiveness, inconstancy, cunning that made him a figure of fun. [55]

For many scholars and current trickster commentators, issues regarding the ambiguity of the trickster touch on the area of gender identification. Essentially, in the recorded mythology of the Cree and Ojibway people, the trickster was predominately male. Although for other groups of Native people this may not hold true, the male identity for the above two tricksters is clearly established in the mythological content. In the traditional mythology, these tricksters participate in initiation ceremonies as they embark on the rites manhood. These ceremonies usually precede a subsequent quest for revenge against the slayers of the tricksters' family members. Both Nelson and Johnston recounted tales which referred specifically to these initiation ceremonies. In his account, Nelson does not include specific details on the initiation ceremony itself, but the trickster's succession into manhood is clearly stated in the following passage:

---

53 Basil Johnston, Ojibway Heritage (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1974), 159.

54 Ibid., 20

55 Ibid., 160.

> ... the girl was delivered a boy, and shortly after, of another. The Elder was called Weesuckajock, the younger Mishawbose. ... These two young men immediately attained "man's estate", i.e., to manhood, and became hunters. [56]

Johnston, on the other hand, is more specific, and his narration regarding this aspect of the trickster mythology is as follows:

> Like other boys, Nanabush had to fast and quest for vision. Just as other boys, he failed initially. ... Eventually, Nanabush received his vision. It was a vision of poverty that he would bring upon himself for helping others. [57]

Despite these accounts, there is still speculation concerning the gender of the trickster. This confusion is connected, in part, to mythological accounts whereby the trickster exercises his transformation abilities and transforms himself into a woman in order to execute some form of trickery. In some version of the trickster myths, this gender transformation motif may occur more than once, and the tales themselves may vary. In accordance to the Cree account recorded by Nelson, the trickster transforms into a woman in order to teach his sexually promiscuous son a lesson. The trickster's disguise backfires and once again he is duped. The tale was recorded by Nelson in the following:

> He took a partner to hiself, by whom he had a son. This son got to man's estate, but had a great aversion to the female sex, which gave his parents a great deal of anxiety. At last the father betho't of a plan in which he was sure of success. He transformed hiself into a most beautiful woman, and when the son returned from his hunting, "Well Son!" said his mother, "here is a young and handsome woman we have procured merely for thee; does she please thee?" Her charms were so great the young man immediately became the source of much trouble to both parents and of disgrace to his father particularly. The mother became jealous and vexed on her son's account that he should so be imposed upon, and done many shameful things to her husband. [58]

Kimberly Echlin provided a more detailed version of the Ojibway gender transformation myth which is narrated in the following passage:

---

[56] Jennifer Brown and Robert Brightman, The Orders of the Dreamed (Manitoba: University of Manitoba Press, 1988), 45

[57] Basil Johnston, Ojibway Heritage (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1974),160.

[58] Jennifer Brown and Robert Brightman, The Orders of the Dreamed (Manitoba: University of Manitoba Press, 1988), 49

> But Nanabush wasn't content only to try to marry as a man. Once he was wandering around when he came upon some woman gathering firewood., He heard them saying, "I wonder how we can marry that man?" "I will play a trick" thought Nanabush as he heard them describe this man in their village. He took the form of a woman, and he made a caribou spleen into a woman's vagina and got all dressed up. When he was very beautiful, he went over to the women and said, "Where is the man who won't marry?" They said "What do you want with him? He would never care about you." "Give him a message,' said Nanabush. "Say to him, 'Her parents sent her here'." ... So, Nanabush was brought to her *(the man's mother)* and her son, and a place was made for him to sit beside the man.
> ...Nanabush lived well as a man's wife. But one day, he realized that the spleen was rotting; he stunk between the legs. His father-in-law was sitting beside him and said, "Phew, what is that smell?'" Nanabush was worried. He tried to get up slowly, but then, right in front of his father-in-law, the old lady, and his husband, the spleen dropped to the ground and Nanabush ran out the door. "They really thought I was a woman," said Nanabush as he ran away laughing. [59]

In this version, Nanabush is fully conscious of his male identity, and the female transformation is simply a disguise for the male trickster. His fraudulent female genitals are a major component of the plot. The humour of the tale is bound to the concept of cross-dressing, and the theme satirizes the masculine ego and reinforces traditional marital practices. In addition, Nanabush does not transform into or possess identifiable community members. Rather than transforming into a familiar community member, he enters the community as a stranger. This particular myth , among others, corresponds to Babcock-Abraham's analysis regarding the power and essence of the " marginality" of the trickster. In this case, marginality allows the audience a better opportunity to objectify and reflect on the actions of the trickster.

On the issue of gender identification, contemporary Native writers in Canada are in the process of redefining the gender of the trickster and have developed, not a female trickster *per se*, but rather an androgynous, gender-free trickster. Ojibway writer, Marie Annharte-Baker declared that generally the Ojibway trickster is male, but she also acknowledged the more contemporary interpretations of the trickster when she stated the following:

> The text-book trickster is as follows: usually male referenced unless pulling some crude cross-sexing joke on others but may actually be pro-female, counter-culture, an off-the-wall kind of androgynous beast. [60]

Anneharte-Baker's comment demonstrates that the more contemporary interpretations of the trickster are gradually gaining corroboration. In his study, Andrew Wiget surmised that the reason the trickster "has been customarily represented in the ethnographic literature as Priapean male" may be due to a "male bias" in the collection of the stories and that "traditional knowledge" was "seldom sought out

---

59 Kimberly Echlin, The Translation of Ojibway: The Nanabush Myths (Toronto: York University, 1982), 85-87.

60 Marie Annharte-Baker, "An Old Inidan Trick is to Laugh" Canadian Theatre Review, 68 (Fall, 1991),48.

from women storytellers." [61] For the Ojibway and Cree people, this argument is unlikely as some of the most recent translations and transcriptions of the myths have be gathered from primary sources by both Native and non-Native as well as male and female ethnographers. In collections recorded and reviewed to date, there exists no reference to an identifiable female trickster among the Cree or the Ojibway. Therefore, for the Cree and Ojibway, the gradual adoption of an androgynous trickster by some of the people is the result of late 20th century Native literature and mythological interpretations.

Like the majority of oral mythology on the trickster, the Cree and Ojibway mythology is endowed with both visceral and libidinous humour. Based on Nelson's manuscripts, it would appear that the visceral and carnal humour during the early 19th century was, of course, too explicit for a Victorian gentleman to repeat or even include within his journals. On this subject, Nelson declared:

> ...their mythology, or stories relating to him are many of them, absurd and indecent in the highest degree ... there are many of these tales the author durst not publish for the obscenity and indecency. There are some obscene passages also in these tales but not more than might be expected from a people yet in a perfect state of nature. [62]

Like other ethnographers of the early 20th century, Nelson attributed the explicitness of the trickster myths to primitiveness of the Ojibway and Cree people, yet he was also able to appreciate the richness of Native language and its ability to contain unconstrained and naturally expressive dialogue. Based on these observations, Nelson made the following comparative comment:

> Here follows a train of stories the most indecent, shameful and sometimes obscene, that one can well imagine. But these people are yet, so far as regards their faculties, in a state of Nature. Everything appears reasonable and natural and must be very gross and palpable indeed when they speak out what they think - they do not use circumlocution to avoid an indecent term, nor have they flourishes to embellish their discourses; and their speeches, to my taste, at least, are far more pleasing and natural then those strained and laboured compositions we meet with amongst ourselves. [63]

In placing the humour into its rightful perspective, Marie Anneharte Baker felt it necessary to qualify the explicitness of the trickster myths from the perspective of the people. She placed the visceral and carnal humour into a cultural context when she stated:

> ...for some Ojibway, Nanabush is not seen as being classically obscene. He is being silly when he uses his penis for a fishing pole or he asks his asshole to mind his food

---

61 Andrew Wiget, " His Life in his Tail: The Native American Trickster and the Literature of Possibility" Redefining American Literary History LaVonne Brown Ruoff and Jerry W. Ward Jr., (New York: The Modern Language Association of America, 1990), 89.

62 Jennifer Brown and Robert Brightman, The Orders of the Dreamed (Manitoba: University of Manitoba Press, 1988), 36.

63 Ibid.,49

> cache. All parts of his body are animated and are not gross anatomy as in today's deodorant-defined dominant society. [64]

Annharte's comment is important in establishing the general context and meaning of the myths from a Native perspective. In addition, she also negates the negative context of "obscenity" which has been perpetuated by the European perspective and interpretation of such material.

In his interpretive rendition of the trickster figure, Highway deviates from the original tribal trickster belonging to the Ojibway/Cree mythology. However, his alterations to the trickster occur within the fluid areas of gender and divinity. In his plays, Highway has maintained the carnal and visceral humour of the trickster, as well as the other identifiable fixed traits. However, via the popularity of his plays, Highway's rendition of the trickster has had and will continue to have a serious impact on the modern interpretations of the trickster figure for a contemporary society, Native and non-Native. Therefore, if the attributes of this tribal trickster are altered, then to what degree, if any, does his role and function within the culture change? Before examining this question, it is first necessary for one to accept the idea that the nature of trickster mythology is reflective of the societies from which it is produced. Accordingly, cultures are dynamic, and the trickster mythology, which is congruent with the nature of oral literature, is not and should not be "frozen". In this light, Highway's rendition of the trickster for a modern day urban Native society may hold merit and meaning within that society as a mythical figure. After all, in his thorough study on the meaning of trickster mythology, Mac Linscott Ricketts concluded:

> The trickster-transformer-culture hero is man being religious in "the other way" the godless way of humanism. He is man, muddling through some of life's problems, discovering his own powers of mind and body, and using them, sometimes wisely, sometimes foolishly, but always enthusiastically. The trickster refuses the way of fidelists, and prefers to make his mistakes by himself and take the consequences for them. ... The real religious quest of man is to obtain omniscience, and through it, omnipotence. The various religions of the world are the many indirect pathways to that goal; the way of the trickster is the direct path. [65]

For Ricketts, the trickster is a religion of sorts; one might say a religion of and about man where the complete "conquest of the unknown" is not the ultimate goal; therefore, as a humanistic type of religion, the trickster myths are grounded in realm of possibilities and are sacred as they "establish and explain the reality of things." [66] In correspondence to this philosophy on trickster mythology, an elder

---

[64] Marie Annharte-Baker, "An Old Inidan Trick is to Laugh" Canadian Theatre Review, 68 (Fall, 1991),49.

[65] Mac Linscott Ricketts, "The North American Indian Trickster" History of Religions, 5 (1965-66), 346-347.

[66] Ibid., 346.

eloquently summarized that "through the stories, everything is made possible." [67] For Highway, the purpose of the trickster is as follows:

> the trickster teaches us about the reason for existence on the planet - that in spite of all the pain and sorrow that goes on in this world, she is the laughing goddess who still remembers how to laugh. No one on earth is able to capture or explain the ambiguity of the trickster. [68]

---

[67] Yellowman in Traditional American Indian Literatures: Texts and Interpretations ed. Karl Kroeber et. al.(Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1981), 80.
[68] Tomson Highway, *Personal Interview*. October 31, 1994. Calgary, Alberta

CHAPTER THREE: An Examination of Highway's Theatrical Adaptation of the Trickster.

I - Introduction

A great deal of contemporary Native literature involves either a conscious or subconscious effort on behalf of Native writers to integrate select aspects of traditional oral literature into contemporary fiction. The end result is what Thomas King has referred to as "inter-fusional literature." [1] In addition to many other identifiable cultural motifs, King particularly noted that "the trickster is an important figure for Native writers, for it allows us to create a particular kind of world in which the Judeo-Christian concern with good and evil and order and disorder is replaced with the more Native concern for balance and harmony." [2] He also noted that "in addition to using trickster figures themselves, a great many Native writers make use of several of the key attributes of the trickster figure", and observed that these types of characters are "frequently tricked, beat up, robbed, deserted, wounded, and ridiculed, but, unlike the historical and contemporary Native characters in white fiction, these characters survive and persevere, and, in many cases, prosper." [3]

It is important to clarify the difference between contemporary Native writers and traditional Native storytellers. Aesthetically, the role of the contemporary writer is very similar to that of the traditional storyteller: both are motivated to entertain and instruct through the use of stories. However, a primary responsibility of the traditional storyteller is to creatively recite and instruct the traditional versions of the mythology of the people from a prescribed script while the contemporary Native writer, on the other hand, possesses and often exercises the artistic freedom to extract and deviate from the original mythologies. The inclusion of mythological content in contemporary Native writing has created a contentious issue surrounding mythological accuracy and the cultural instruction or preservation of the traditional trickster figure.

---

[1] Thomas King, ed., All My Relations: An Anthology of Contemporary Native Fiction. (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart Inc., 1990), xii.

[2] Ibid., xiii.

[3] Thomas King, "Introduction: An Anthology of Canadian Native Fiction" The Canadian Fiction Magazine, 60 (Spring 1987), 8.

The preservation of oral mythology in its original form and mode of transmission has been seriously threatened by the effects of cultural suppression and traumatic changes within Native communities. The original mythology and the individuals associated with the practice of traditional storytelling are not widely accessible to contemporary Native people. Although many of the traditional myths have been ethnographically recorded in a written form, they firstly have lost the nature of three dimensional structure, and secondly, have lost some degree of content and meaning due to censorship and/or translation. Subsequently, the contemporary Native literature which incorporates Native mythology has become more accessible to the general Native and non-Native populations than the traditional oral mythology itself. Although the intention of many Native writers may not involve traditional instruction, the contemporary renditions of mythological figures in contemporary Native literature have gradually acquired cultural didactic expectations which were originally assigned to the once accessible traditional mythology. When the cultural didactic expectations related to mythology are transferred by the public, Native or non-Native, from the traditional storyteller to contemporary Native writer who has simply incorporated mythological content, then the issue of artistic responsibility becomes both complicated and controversial. Artistic responsibility, under these circumstances includes cultural and mythological instruction and, as a result, reveals a growing concern on behalf of Native writers over the ambiguous, yet prevalent, culturally didactic role of the writer.

Native writer and literary critic, Thomas King identified and discussed certain expectations placed on Native writers by the general public which have, from his perspective, limited the artistic freedom of the writer and, therefore, the development of Native literature in general. These expectations include the desire on behalf of the readers or audience members for authenticity and accuracy. King proposed that Native writers have been expected to function within particular cultural, political, and historical boundaries.[4] On this topic, he concluded:

> This literature is expected to be authentic (the demand for the anthropological detail) and accurate (the demand for the historical detail). These expectations, at the very least, tend to limit imaginative play, and have, I think, affected the literature that Native writers have produced. [5]

Interestingly enough, King's comment is not restricted to a non-Native audience. In fact, the expectations he identifies may be intensified by the responses, opinions, and directions of the traditionalists from Native communities who hold the responsibility of cultural preservation. With a

---

[4]Thomas King, ed., All My Relations: An Anthology of Contemporary Native Fiction (Toronto McClelland and Stewart Inc., 1990), xv.

[5] Thomas King, "Introduction: An Anthology of Canadian Native Fiction" The Canadian Fiction Magazine. 60 (Spring 1987), 6.

hint of sarcasm, Marie Annharte-Baker acknowledged the issue of cultural protocol within the Native community when she stated, "We must appreciate the many traditional Indians who want to follow custom in an authoritative authoritarian, and are *so-sore-and-bitter-about-it* matter." [6] This cultural protocol is especially exercised in the arena of sacredness, and the trickster tales, although they are not worshipped, are a part of the sacred mythology of Native people. Accordingly, Mac Linscott Ricketts contended that "the trickster himself is never held in awe, but, significantly, his myths are. They are surrounded by taboos; they can be told only at night, only in the winter, etc. The myths are sacred because they establish and explain the reality of things." [7] Thus, by lifting the trickster figure from traditional mythology and transplanting it into contemporary literature, Native writers are, in a sense, delving into what is considered to be sacred material.

Tomson Highway is one of the most prominent Native writers in Canada to challenge the cultural protocol surrounding the expectations of authenticity and accuracy in mythological content. He has acknowledged the didactic capabilities of the writer and the theatre and has applied these capabilities to the task concerning the revitalization of the trickster motif:

> I suppose that we Indian people writing for the stage ultimately want to be heard so the dream life [mythology] of this particular people, this particular landscape, can achieve some degree of exposure among general audiences. They just may learn, we must keep hoping, something new and something terribly relevant and beautiful about that particular landscape that they too have become inhabitants of. [8]

By acknowledging the didactic possibilities of the theatre, Highway has also, by extension, inherited the expectation of cultural or mythological accuracy from his audiences. Highway's depiction of the trickster is not completely synchronous to the traditional figure presented to the Cree and Ojibway people through oral literature. As a theatrical artist flexing his artistic freedom, Highway has deviated from certain familiar trickster attributes in order to revitalize the trickster as an attempt to develop cultural relevancy for a modern Native society. From his own perspective, Highway has suffered at the hands of Native critics for his interpretive rendition of the trickster figure which has inevitably lead to criticism over his depiction of Native women and culture in general. Gloria Miguel, a native actor from the United States who played Pelajia Patchnose in the original production of *The Rez Sisters*, strongly expressed her opposition to *Dry Lips Oughta Move to Kapuskasing*:

> The hate men felt was shown in a degrading way. They took the beauty from her [the trickster]. I don't mind shock - but that was hate personified. [9]

---

[6] Marie Annharte Baker, "An Old Indian Trick is to Laugh" Canadian Theatre Review, 68 (Fall 1991), 48.
[7] Mac Linscott Ricketts, "The North American Indian Trickster" History of Religions 5 (1965-66), 344.
[8] Tomson Highway. "On Native Mythology" Theatrum 6 (Spring 1987), 31.
[9] Gerald Hannon," Tomson and the Trickster" Toronto Life. 25-4 (March 1991), 81

Like Miguel, many other Native women have expressed deep concern over what has been labeled "misogynist" content in Highway's play, *Dry Lips Oughta Move to Kapuskasing*. [10] At the centre of this controversy is the trickster, or, more accurately, Highway's contemporary rendition thereof. After an interview with Highway, a critic appropriately concluded that, "it is not ironic at all that the trickster has gotten Tomson into trouble."[11]

II - Modernizing Trickster

Within most Native trickster cycles, the trickster, after completing his universal renovations and cultural instruction, retires to another world. [12] Highway's objective of revitalizing the trickster, established early on in his career as a playwright, stemmed from his belief that the trickster has always remained with Native people and that maybe, "she/he just got drunk and passed out under the table" and "it's up to us to give Nanabush one good kick in the ass so s/he can stand on her own two feet." [13] In 1986, Highway, along with Native writers Daniel David Moses and Lenore Keeshig-Tobias, founded *The Committee to Re-establish the Trickster* whose mandate was to re-introduce the trickster through literature. [14] In terms of adhering to culturally accurate renditions of the trickster motif or sacred icons, Highway clearly argued in favour of artistic freedom:

> I don't think any religion or any society should be so holy as to be untouchable. I don't think that any icon should be put on a pedestal because once you put it on a pedestal it's too easy to tear down. [15]

In spite of his perspective on religious icons, Highway acknowledged the importance of the trickster to Native culture and commented: "I realize the importance of this character to the spiritual vitality, to the survival of an entire nation."[16] On several occasions, however, he has argued that it is time to revitalize and, yes, modernize the trickster in order to establish cultural relevancy in a modern Native world, and that this process has rightly fallen into the hands of the contemporary Native storytellers and/or writers. Highway's opinion on this matter is reflected in the following statement:

> The only thing is, this mythology has to be reworked somewhat if it is to be relevant to us Indians living in today's modern world. The way these stories go to date, they were meant for a people who lived in a forest environment; we -our family - were all born in tents, grew up traveling by dog-sled and canoe, etc. But, today, as an adult, I am urban by choice. So in order for these myths to be relevant to my life, to my own

---

[10] Gerald Hannon, " Tomson and the Trickster" Toronto Life. 25•4 (March 1991), 81.

[11] Gerald Hannon, " Tomson and the Trickster" Toronto Life. 25•4 (March 1991), 44.

[12] Paul Radin, The Trickster (New York: Schocken Books, 1972), 53.

[13] Judy Stead, "My Way: Tomson Highway Opens at Alex" The Toronto Star (24 March 1991), D2.

[14] M.T. Kelly, "The Trickster" This Magazine. 21•1 (March/April), 40.

[15] Robert Enright, "Let Us Now Combine Mythologies: The Theatrical Art of Tomson Highway" Border Crossings 11 (December 1992), 27.

[16] Gerald Hannon, " Tomson and the Trickster" Toronto Life. 25•4 (March 1991), 41.

> system of spiritual beliefs, I have to apply this mythology to the realities of city living. So, Weesageechak, the trickster figure, who stands at the very centre of Cree mythology and who is a figure as important to Cree culture as Christ is to Western culture, still hangs around and about the lakes and forests of northern Manitoba, yes, but he also takes strolls down Yonge Street, drinks beer, sometimes passes out at the Silver Dollar and goes shopping at the Eaton Centre. [17]

The concept of creating new trickster myths to meet the cultural needs of the people is not necessarily a new concept. For example, in his study on the trickster, Andrew Wiget cited the use of trickster mythology by young members of the Winnebago people who were attempting to introduce and gain support from their elders for the peyote religion. [18] He also cited a trickster myth which was obviously created in the post-colonial era in order to express concerns and satirize the economic principles of the fur trade in conjunction the influx of Christianity. Wiget provided the following narrated version of the myth:

> The Plains Cree tell the story of how Wisahketchak the Trickster buys some goods at the trading post on credit. Unable to pay for them and being an inept trapper, he decides to use poison to ensure his success. Returning home from the post, he has his wife mix the poison in to little round cakes and that he sets to harden. When they are hardened, he packs up and sets out to the woods, where, after a good deal of pleading, he convinces a wolf to gather all the other wolves and foxes to hear some 'good tidings'. When he has seated them in a semi-circle in front of him, he begins to speak and places the cakes "in their mouth one by one, round the circle, all the while assuring them that if they eat the cakes and accept religion, they will live a long time. They die before he finishes their first, fatal homily, and with their skins, he settles his debt. [19]

In these myths, the trickster has maintained fundamental tribal traits. Highway's rendition, on the other hand, manipulates certain trickster attributes which contrast with the Cree/Ojibway versions and has provoked a controversy grounded in the arena of cultural accuracy and artistic responsibility. Highway's deviations from traditional Cree/Ojibway tribal trickster attributes are most pronounced in his interpretation of the trickster's gender, divine status, and marginal domain.

III - Highway's rendition

According to Highway, the trickster is a reflection of the Cree language and is, therefore, not gender based. Thus, in *The Rez Sisters*, Nanabush appears as a masculine figure among women, and in *Dry Lips Oughta Move to Kapuskasing*, "the flip-side to *The Rez Sisters*", Nanabush is portrayed as a feminine figure among men. [20] In *Dry Lips*, Nanabush is incorporated into a more serious, violent plot

---

[17] Tomson Highway, "On Native Mythology" Theatrum. 6 (Spring 1987), 59.

[18] Andrew Wiget, "His Life in his Tail: The Native American Trickster and the Literature of Possibility" Redefining American Literary History (ed) LaVonne Brown Ruoff and Jerry W. Ward Jr. (New York: The Modern Language Association of America, 1990), 93.

[19] Ibid., 91.

[20] Tomson Highway, Dry Lips Oughta Move to Kapuskasing (Saskatoon: Fifth House Publishers, 1990), 12.

than that of *The Rez Sisters* and is subject to, "some of the darker, violent currents in Native culture."[21] Highway was prepared for criticism when he stated that, "*Dry Lips* will probably upset some people, but the theatre should provoke its audience".[22] In fact, Highway has received a great deal of criticism from Native women for his harsh treatment of Nanabush in *Dry Lips Oughta Move to Kapuskasing* which opposes the more romantic, aesthetically beautiful aspects of the masculine presentation of Nanabush in *The Rez Sisters*. The difference in the Nanabush figures from both plays prompted the following observation from a Highway biographer:

> Women who have seen both plays were struck by the different treatments afforded the Nanabush figure - magical, beautiful, and male in the first play; bawdy, helpless, grotesque and female in the second. [23]

Highway is highly inspired by mythology, and his use of the trickster is a means to incorporate what he believes to be a universal icon into a dramatic presentation. Generally, Highway, like most trickster scholars, believes that the purpose of the trickster is to teach human beings cultural and universal principles. On this subject, he stated:

> The trickster teaches us about the reason for existence on the planet - that in spite of all the pain and sorrow that goes on in this world, she is the laughing goddess who still remembers how to laugh. No one on this earth is able to capture or explain the ambiguity of the trickster. [24]

> The Trickster [is] the creature in Cree mythology that I identify with the most. The Trickster entertains and educates. Human existence isn't a struggle for redemption to the Trickster. It's fun, a joyous celebration. And that's exactly how I see it too. [25]

The dramatic incorporation and manipulation of the trickster has enabled Highway to metaphorically and simultaneously address several multi-layered themes within his work evolving around gender roles, cultural oppression, and theological subjugation. He describes the trickster as a combination of the universal clowns and heroes present in other world mythologies. By tapping into universal commonalties of the trickster, Highway feels that his theatre is accessible to all cultures. On this subject, Highway commented:

> ...those kind of characters are universal - they're storytelling conventions that exist in every culture. The concept of the hero is a universal and so is the heroic myth. And the comic or clown character. [26]

---

[21] Yhap, Beverly. " On Their Own Terms." Canadian Theatre Review. 56 (1988, Fall), 26.

[22] Ibid, 26.

[23] Gerald Hannon, " Tomson and the Trickster" Toronto Life. 25•4 (March 1991), 44.

[24] Tomson Highway, *Personal Interview*. October 31, 1994. Calgary, Alberta.

[25] Ted Ferguson, "Native Son" Imperial Oil Review 73•395 (Winter, 1989), 18-19.

[26] Robert Enright, "Let Us Now Combine Mythologies: The Theatrical Art of Tomson Highway" Border Crossings 11 (December 1992), 24.

In addition to the comical aspects of the trickster, Highway also views the trickster as a potentially dangerous figure capable of initiating chaos within an orderly world. His assessment on this aspect of the trickster is in agreement with the traditional function of the trickster within the original mythology. Typically, the trickster is a powerful figure with the potential to misuse or misdirect his supernatural energies. In his finest form, the trickster can function as a supernatural figure gone awry. He has the potential to inflict chaos on an orderly world as a means of creating the possibility of a new found order. Accordingly, Highway acknowledged this aspect of the trickster, which he employed in *Dry Lips Oughta Move to Kapuskasing*, when he claimed:

> I think he should be dangerous; I think he should push people right to the edge. I think - when he needs to be - he should be absolutely horrifying. [27]

In pursuit of a metaphor for the theological clash between Native spirituality and Christianity, Highway has capitalized on the trickster figure in his scripts. He often contrasts the role and function of the trickster in Native theology to that of Jesus Christ and/or God in Christian theology. As a result, Highway is able to transmit metaphorical messages to the public concerning the historical impact of Christianity on Native culture. Highway explained this theological contrast in the following passage:

> What happened was the clash of two distinct theological systems - and more specifically - the clash of two pivotal hero figures: Jesus Christ and this clown, Nanabush. One mythology states that we're here to suffer; the other states that we're here for a good time. What happened historically is that this clown, this good-time guy was told he had no business laughing. [28]

In addition, this metaphor has also allowed Highway to contrast the effects of enforced patriarchal societal structures on the traditionally matrilineal societies. This historical metaphor is captured in his second play through his incorporation of a demonstrative female trickster portraying stereotypical female icons which are both abused and objectified by the male characters.

In traditional mythology, the trickster is not the Supreme Being, Great Spirit, or Creator. As noted by Basil Johnston, he is an incorporeal being who is understood to be part human and part spirit in all respects. [29] In fact, it is this very aspect of the trickster which has contributed to his complex ambiguity. In earlier interviews, Highway's interpretation of the trickster with regards to his divine status is in agreement with the traditional mythology. In an interview in 1987, Highway described the trickster with respect to *The Rez Sisters* in the following words:

---

[27] Robert Enright, "Let Us Now Combine Mythologies: The Theatrical Art of Tomson Highway" Border Crossings 11 (December 1992), 27.

[28] Gerald Harmon, " Tomson and the Trickster" Toronto Life. 25-4 (March 1991), 41.

[29] Basil Johnston, Ojibway Heritage (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1974), 160.

> As this spirit figure (Nanabush) is the one who straddles the consciousness of Man and that of God, the intermediary between the Great Spirit and his people - he informs the cancer victim among the group of women..."that it is almost time for you to come with me". [30]

In 1992, one year after the production of *Dry Lips Oughta Move to Kapuskasing* at the Royal Alexandra Theatre in Ottawa, however, Highway began to compare the divinity of the trickster to that of God:

> I think he's capable of anything that the human heart is capable of, that God is capable of. I think God is ultimately Nanabush and by extension what he/she represents. God, the Great Spirit, whatever you wish to call this being. [31]

In a variety of subsequent personal appearances and interviews since 1992, Highway has continued to make similar correlative statements when defining the trickster character in his plays. It is interesting that Highway's interpretation of the trickster has changed over time. Initially, Highway made comparative references between Jesus Christ and the trickster in order to place the trickster into a theological context which is understandable to the general public. Gradually, however, he has elevated the divine status of this mythical figure from a messenger of God to God himself/herself or incarnations thereof. In a special presentation in 1994, Highway stated that his different portrayals of the trickster in his two published plays represented two different incarnations of God:

> *The Rez Sisters* is about seven women and a male reincarnation of the trickster: Re - the male incarnation of God. The other play in the cycle of seven is the flip side to *The Rez Sisters*. It is called *Dry Lips Oughta Move to Kapuskasing* and is about seven men, the husbands, sons, brothers, and brother-in laws to the Rez sisters, and the female incarnation of the trickster: Re- the female incarnation of God. [32]

For Highway, the trickster has become an increasingly important figure in the development of the metaphorical content of his work. It appears that as Highway's interpretation of the trickster's divine status has increased, his metaphorical use of this figure has simultaneously becomes more complex and powerful within his work. As the accessibility of his plays is popularized through publication and production, Highway's view of the trickster disseminates. Therefore, there exists the possibility that his rendition of the trickster may gradually displace the traditional semi-human/messenger trickster as presented in the Cree/Ojibway mythology.

Highway's first play, *The Rez Sisters*, presents his rendition of the trickster as a male entity. In this play, the trickster transforms into three different character manifestations: the Seagull, the Bingo Master, and the Nighthawk. In the production notes included in the published performance texts,

---

[30] Tomson Highway, "On Native Mythology" Theatrum. 6 (Spring 1987), 30.

[31] Robert Enright, "Let Us Now Combine Mythologies: The Theatrical Art of Tomson Highway" Border Crossings 11 (December 1992), 27.

[32] Tomson Highway. *Special Presentation*. October 31, 1994 .Mount Royal College. .

Highway specifies that the role of Nanabush, "is to be played by a male dancer - modern, ballet, or traditional."[33] In the original production of *The Rez Sisters*, the role of Nanabush was choreographed and played by Highway's brother René, a professional dancer. *The Rez Sisters* explores and celebrates the connectivity of seven vibrant Native women, who share their dreams while they accept and embrace the tribulations of their pasts and their lives as a part of a larger community. The character revelations occur against the back-drop of a collective quest to attend the "biggest bingo in the world."[34] Throughout the play, the ever-present and mythical Nanabush is hovering on the periphery of the action. By virtue of his domain and ability to exist somewhere in between the spiritual and physical worlds, the trickster, in this play, is recognizable, despite his guises, to only two characters: Marie-Adele, who is embarking on her journey to the spirit world as she approaches death, and Zhaboonigan, who exists in an altered state of reality due a traumatic and violent rape as a young girl. In the stage directions accompanying Marie-Adele's first encounter with the trickster, Highway specified that, "Only she and Zhaboonigan can see the spirit inside the bird and can sort of - though not quite- recognize him for who he is."[35]

In this play, Nanabush is serene, seductive, and mischievous. Although he taunts Marie-Adele and eventually dances her into the spirit world, he does not emanate catastrophic danger and is not aggressively threatening to the community as a whole. There is a comfortable quality to this trickster. As the Seagull, he is simply described as "a dancer with white feathers."[36] As the Nighthawk, Nanabush appears in dark feathers as he thrashes at the ailing Marie-Adele.[37] As the Bingo Master, Nanabush is described as "the most beautiful man in the world...dressed to kill: tails rhinestones, and all."[38] In his finalé, Nanabush transforms from the Bingo Master back to the Nighthawk as he waltzes Marie-Adele to her death. The scene is directed by the playwright in the following passage:

> Bingo cards are flying like confetti. Total madness and mayhem. The music is going crazy. And out of this chaos emerges the calm, silent image of Marie-Adele waltzing romantically in the arms of the Bingo Master. The Bingo Master says "Bingo" into her ear. And the Bingo Master changes, with sudden bird-like movements, into the nighthawk, Nanabush in dark feathers. Marie-Adele meets Nanabush.[39]

The Rez Sisters received rave reviews and positive responses from both the theatrical and Native communities. Women generally embraced and praised Highway for his portrayal of Native women

---

[33] Tomson Highway, The Rez Sisters (Saskatoon: Fifth House Publishers, 1988), xi.
[34] Ibid, 27.
[35] Ibid, 18.
[36] Ibid, 18.
[37] Ibid, 92.
[38] Ibid, 100.
[39] Ibid, 103.

and Native communities. Like the French Canadian playwright, Michele Tremblay, Highway was heralded as one of the few male playwrights able to come close to producing feminist theatre. Indeed, one female critic cautiously proclaimed:

> Though *The Rez Sisters* is a play about women, it is not a feminist play - but few men have come as close to capturing the essence of what it is to be a woman as Highway.[40]

The praise received for *The Rez Sisters* during the period surrounding its original production prompted the following statement from Highway in 1987:

> I am sensitive to women because of the matrilineal principle in our culture, which has gone on for thousands of years. Women have such an ability to express themselves emotionally. Men are clogged up. And as a writer, you want to express emotion. [41]

Critics were also mesmerized by Highway's theatrical rendition and use of the trickster which added to the complexity and Native content of his work. On the presence of the trickster on stage, a critic, obviously moved by the theatrical experience, remarked:

> And through it all dances the elusive figure of Nanabush - sometimes in white feathers, sometimes in black, sometimes a hovering figure of consolation and beauty, sometimes a terrifying belligerent guide into the spirit world. [42]

The critical praise surrounding Highway's depiction of Native women and the trickster figure in *The Rez Sisters* may very well have set up thematic expectations on behalf of the public with respect to this playwright and, therefore, may also be partially responsible for the theatrical shock which resulted in harsh criticism of Highway and his second play. Indeed, Marie Annharte-Baker observed that after experiencing *The Rez Sisters*, "some women looked to the works of Tomson Highway to educate the public about racism and sexism in a community in transition. However, *Dry Lips Oughta Move to Kapuskasing* silenced Aboriginal women." [43] Ironically, *Dry Lips* has gradually become a controversial icon in the development of Canadian Native literature and theatre in general.

In his second play, Highway expanded on his use of the trickster and presented his rendition of the trickster as a female entity. Generally, *Dry Lips Oughta Move to Kapuskasing* explores the spiritual vacancy of contemporary Native men haunted by the remnants of cultural oppression, Christianization, and alcoholism. The men in the play are depicted as disarmed-type warriors who helplessly observe

---

[40] Agnes Grant, "Canadian Native Literature: The Drama of George Ryga and Tomson Highway" Australian-Canadian Studies 10•2 (1992), 47.

[41] Ray Conlogue, "Mixing Spirits, Bingo, and Genius." The Globe and Mail. (21 November 1987), C5.

[42] Gerald Hannon, " Tomson and the Trickster" Toronto Life. 25•4 (March 1991), 44.

[43] Marie Annehart Baker, "An Old Indian Trick is to Laugh" Canadian Theatre Review, 68 (Fall 1991), 88.

and/or assist in destructive acts inflicted on the Native women, or Nanabush, or in more symbolic terms, Native spirituality. Within the context of a male dream in this play, Nanabush "possesses" the spirit of three different stereotypical female characters from the fictional community: Gazelle Nataways - the whore icon, Black Lady Halked - the alcoholic Madonna icon, and Patsy Pegehmajig - the pure Madonna. [44] This female version of the trickster icon is continually pitted against the symbols and principles of Christianity, resulting in a metaphorical and violent rape of the trickster.

It is unclear as to what degree Highway's personal sexual orientation has influenced his gender-free interpretation of the trickster. However, it is interesting to note that when approached on this topic in an interview, Highway stated that he views himself, not as gender-free, but rather as a "multi-gendered" human being. [45] Over time, Highway has established a linguistical argument which supports his interpretation of a gender-free trickster. This argument justified Highway's decision to change the trickster from a male entity in *The Rez Sisters* to a female entity in *Dry Lips*. Although the trickster has been noted to dabble in Native affairs as a transvestite, Highway's interpretation of the trickster as gender-neutral is inaccurate when contrasted with the traditional Cree or Ojibway male trickster figure. For the most part, the newly revised androgynous version of the trickster has been perpetuated by contemporary Native literature and popularized in Canada primarily by Tomson Highway and, more recently by Thomas King. [46] Highway has stated that his interpretation of the trickster as a gender-free being is based on the linguistic nature of Native languages. In his "Note on Nanabush" included in *Dry Lips Oughta Move to Kapuskasing*, Highway states:

> The most explicit distinguishing feature between the North American Indian languages and the European languages is that in Indian (e.g. Cree, Ojibway), there is no gender. In Cree, Ojibway, etc., unlike English, French, German, etc., the male-female-neuter hierarchy is entirely absent. So that by this system of thought, the central hero figure from our mythology - theology, if you will - is theoretically neither exclusively male not exclusively female, or is both simultaneously. Therefore, where in *The Rez Sisters*, Nanabush was male, in this play - "flip-side" of *The Rez Sisters* - Nanabush is female. [47]

Highway's assessment of the Cree and Ojibway languages is accurate in terms of general noun and pronoun usage. Typically, the Algonquain languages classify nouns into linguistic categories which differentiate animate nouns from inanimate nouns. However, these languages do have specific gender reference terms for humans which are governed more precisely by kinship gender roles. For example, in the Cree language there are gender specific terms like son, (nikasis), daughter (nitânis), mother (okâwîmâw or nikâway), father (nohtâwiy) , man (Nâpew), and woman (iskwew), brother in-law (nisis

---

[44] Jon Kaplan, "Tomson Highway: Ribald Comedy Set to Rattle Royal Alex" NOW (11-17 April 1991), 22.

[45] Tomson Highway, *Personal Interview*. October 31, 1994. Calgary, Alberta.

[46] Thomas King incorporated a gender-free trickster into his published short story, *The One about Coyote Going West*. Although King is an American Indian, he has spent a great deal of his academic career in Canada.

[47] Tomson Highway, Dry Lips Oughta Move to Kapuskasing (Saskatoon: Fifth House Publishers, 1990), 12.

or nestow), boy (napesis), girl (iskwesis), and etc. Interestingly enough, the term for sister and brother (nimsis) is the same. The Ojibway language, also an Algonquain language, is very similar to Cree in this respect. By virtue of his kinship described in the Cree and Ojibway trickster tales, the trickster is identified as a son, a son-in-law, and a grandson; therefore, he is established as a male trickster. [48] Thus Highway is not completely accurate in his claim that Native languages are completely gender-free. The languages characteristically employ gender differentiation with regards to humans in relation to kinship roles and not necessarily with regards to other nouns or in association with general pronoun usage. When questioned on his gender-free interpretation of the trickster, Highway admitted that his argument is based on:

> ...something that comes from my study of Native languages, and it comes from the fact that I speak fluent Cree (my first language is Cree), so I have had the privilege of having taken a very close and intimate look at the structure of both languages. I've heard people say that my interpretation is wrong. So yes, it does come from me, but this gender idea is based on the research and conclusions that I have come up with, and I offer them up for challenge - they should be challenged. [49]

Some critics have accused Highway of exploiting the gender issue and proposed that his motives for the female version of the trickster amount to nothing more than contrived comedy. One critic contemplated this idea when he suggested that "perhaps one does think differently about the sexes if one's mother tongue is not gender-based. Still, I can't help but wonder whether Tomson isn't after a cheap laugh sometimes. He knows that everyone knows fat women are funny. " [50] This type of criticism seems overly harsh and simplistic in light of the metaphorical representation of the stereotypical female icons in the play, which are included within the context of a male dream. Although Highway has incorporated comedy in the exaggerated sexual appearance of his female trickster, this comedy is naturally derived from the traditional characteristics of the trickster, and thus the comedy is not motivated purely by gender representation. In other words, a male trickster with an incredibly long and uncontrollable penis, as presented in the traditional mythology, is as innately comedic as a "fat woman" with exaggerated breasts and buttocks.

Unlike *The Rez Sisters*, where the trickster was portrayed as a serene and beautifully haunting mythical figure, Highway introduced audiences to the more grotesque aspects of the trickster in *Dry Lips Oughta Move to Kapuskasing*. In this play, the trickster sports oversize breasts, buttocks, and a pregnant belly. In addition, the trickster farts, takes a poop while mounted on a toilet, is raped with a crucifix, performs a striptease and, in a drunken stupor, simulates the birthing process on top of a

---

[48] The kinship of the trickster is noted in several studies including Basil Johnston, Kimberly Echlin, and George Nelson's ethnographic collections of trickster myths.

[49] Tomson Highway, *Personal Interview* October 31, 1994 (Calgary, Alberta).

[50] Gerald Hannon, " Tomson and the Trickster" Toronto Life. 25•4 (March 1991), 82.

jukebox. After experiencing a production of *Dry Lips Oughta Move to Kapuskasing*, a critic commented:

> She is a she with huge prosthetic tits, with an equally huge fat ass; a she who, at one of the climatic moments of the play, gets raped with a crucifix. She also gets to fart a little "poot" flag and take a shit in public. [51]

In contrast to the positive reactions from Native women who experienced *The Rez Sisters*, Native women who experienced *Dry Lips Oughta Move to Kapuskasing* were shocked and prompted to react and respond, in some cases, vehemently to the play. One Native woman who had seen a production of *Dry Lips Oughta Move to Kapuskasing* in Toronto in March, 1991 claimed:

> Aboriginal women were portrayed as loose, unfaithful, sleazy drunks with no respect for human life and child birth. The women in the play were nude and showed no modesty for their body but allowed it to be portrayed in a degrading manner. ...This pornography, this disrespectful portrayal, only reinforces damaging stereotypes about our women. ...Weesageechak is a sacred spirit. ...his role is to play tricks on us, but the tricks always have a moral lesson. He is also the spirit we pray to when we are using medicines to heal someone. He is sacred, not someone to be trivialized or taken in vain.[52]

Gender aside, the grotesque depiction of the trickster, with exaggerated sex organs and demonstrative visceral actions, is consistent with the traditional aspects of the Ojibway/Cree male trickster. Highway attempted to explain his interpretation regarding the purpose behind the sexual and visceral grotesques of trickster mythology:

> The Trickster was a very sensual character - making love, eating - all those bodily functions, he celebrated them, he lives for them. The Trickster's most frequent conversational partner was his anus. In English the immediate impulse is to censor that, but in Cree it makes perfect sense. [53]

Highway has claimed that he uses this aspect of the trickster as a means to address the "anal retentiveness" of white society and that this figure, when juxtaposed against the restrictive Christian views on sexuality has the ability to release the sensual aspects of human beings. Highway also believes that the anus is a metaphorical representation of human honesty and as such promotes the ideology of humility and equality. He explained the purpose and nature behind the visceral humour of the trickster in the following passage:

> In her human persona, Nanabush articulates the belief of a society that's not anally retentive. The most private part of humans, the anus, is the centre of human honesty.

---

[51] Gerald Hannon, " Tomson and the Trickster" Toronto Life. 25•4 (March 1991), 44.

[52] Anita Tuharsky, " Play Promotes Racism, Sexism and Oppression." Windspeaker. (29 March 1991), 5.

[53] Nancy Wigston, "Nanabush in the City: A Profile of Tomson Highway" Books in Canada 18•2 (March 1989),8.

> Through Nanabush, I'd like to address the anal retentiveness of mainstream white society, where the sexual organs are seen as instruments of evil. In fact, they're the most beautiful things on the face of the earth. Any theology or philosophy that holds that genitals are the instruments of the devil, sees their use to be evil. Until that idea changes, women and children will continue to be the objects of abuse. [54]

Although Highway addressed the sexual conservatism of Western society through the trickster, it is likely that his grotesques representation was also motivated by an anticipated indignation in the audience response. Like many artists, it is probable that Highway purposely incorporated a high degree of shock value into this script. In this light, he may have capitalized on the carnal attributes of the trickster in a theatrical setting with the intention to evoke a type of shock-response within the audience. In reply to his most severe critics who have objected to the explicit nature of his plays, Highway retorted:

> I think that people who are uptight about sexuality should be shocked into reality. - shocked into enjoying it. There is so much hypocrisy around the area of sexuality, and this hypocrisy is what has damaged so many people. [55]

The difficult and explicit portrayal of the trickster in *Dry Lips* relies extensively on fine acting. Within almost all of the production reviews on *Dry Lips*, Doris Linklater, who played Nanabush in the Native Earth Performing Arts productions from 1990-1991, received glowing reviews. This is evident in the following review:

> Doris Linklater earned it for weaving the bawdiest of magic - Nanabush with the big tits, Nanabush with the fat ass, Nanabush of the silvery dancing bustle, Nanabush taking a good long shit, sitting on the toilet dressed as God. Our God - white hair, beard, surrounded by little white puffy clouds. Our God in elegant, high-heeled pumps. Our God filing His/Her fingernails. Our God seen by a people plundered in His name. [56]

Despite Linklater's talented contribution to Highway's script, many audience members were still shocked by his grotesque interpretation of the trickster, and despite her perspective on the role, a critic for the *Globe and Mail* couldn't help but note, "the clucking of the NAC audience voicing its disapproval" in response to the scene where Nanabush sits on the toilet to file her nails and relieve her bowel. [57] Some audiences members who experienced Highway's plays may have been unaware of the visceral aspect of the trickster or may not have been prepared for the theatrical imagery or added dimension of this type of humour enacted on stage. For those audience members unaware of the trickster's visceral aspects, *Dry Lips* may have been an understandable shock. For those who were aware and still shocked, one must wonder whether the storytelling of visceral humour is more comical

---

[54] Jon Kaplan, "Tomson Highway: Ribald Comedy Set to Rattle Royal Alex" NOW (11-17 April 1991), 22.

[55] Tomson Highway, *Personal Interview*. October 31, 1994. Calgary, Alberta.

[56] Gerald Hannon, "Tomson and the Trickster" Toronto Life 25•4 (March 1991), 31.

[57] Godfrey, Stephan. "Trip From Comedy to Drama a Worthwhile, If Bumpy, Ride." The Globe and Mail. (1991 March 9), C2.

than the visual enactment of it or more culturally acceptable when the trickster is male. As an actress, Linklater noted some of the difficulties associated with the grotesqueness in her portrayal of trickster:

> It was the hardest role I've ever played. When we workshopped it in Montreal, I didn't really understand why Nanabush would portray other characters so harshly. And I began to understand why she did that. The Trickster is someone who shows you hard human character traits, and when you see those sides you don't hate them for it. You learn. The Trickster - he/she- can be very hard or very funny. I know a lot of women felt bad about Nanabush - but she had a hold on these men. Whenever the men talked about the incident where Black Lady Halked gave birth, she exaggerated everything they did. The men became her puppets. [58]

The aspect of visceral humour associated with the trickster originates from an oral storytelling aesthetic. The aesthetic of the theatre introduces a new dimension to the visceral humour of trickster mythology which may not be as comedically effective because the visual role of the imagination and the narrative qualities of the storyteller have been replaced by actors and a fixed script.

In Native philosophy, the spiritual world or domain is ever present and operative. This world is inhabited by spiritual beings such as the trickster. The world of spirituality is, therefore, within the domain of the trickster. According to Native culture, it is generally believed that some human beings have the ability to communicate or visit the spiritual world through death, dreams, or altered states of reality. When this occurs, interaction and communication between humans and the spiritual world is open and active. In Highway's plays, the interaction between Nanabush and human characters is dependent on the mind state of the characters. In *The Rez Sisters,* for instance, the only two characters who interact directly with Nanabush are Marie-Adele Starblanket, who is close to death, and Zhaboonigan Peterson, who is emotionally disturbed. In *Dry Lips Oughta Move to Kapuskasing*, Highway placed the context of the play in a dream state. Through the dream of Zachary Jeremiah Keechigeesik, Highway was able to transport the reality of the play to a metaphysical level: the trickster's domain. This context provided Nanabush with the opportunity to interact with all the characters in Zachary's dream. Highway explained the philosophical purpose behind the dream context in *Dry Lips Oughta Move to Kapuskasing* :

> Number one, I wanted to make a distinction between so-called aboriginal societies and so-called industrial societies, whether we're talking about the Indians of North America of the aboriginals of Australia. Putting it very simplistic ally, the collective intellect of industrialized society has been developed to such a high degree at the expense of its spiritual centre. Whereas, with the aboriginal cultures, it's the reverse. We're not a highly intellectualized or highly technologized society, but we haven't sacrificed our spiritual centre. And extending that idea one step further, our spiritual centre is very much expressed in the way our dream world operates. Our dream

---

[58] Gerald Hannon, " Tomson and the Trickster" Toronto Life. 25-4 (March 1991), 81.

> visions affect our day-to-day lives and, certainly for North American Indian culture, our dream life is every bit as important as our physical, conscious life. [59]

For many playwrights, the dream is a theatrical device. For Highway, it is a means to deal with harsh content in an almost surrealistic style. Some critics of *Dry Lips Oughta Move to Kapuskasing*, however, viewed the dream world initiated by Nanabush as a scapegoat of sorts:

> The drawback of this device, however, is that it tends to reduce the importance of the action, perhaps allowing us to dismiss its import with some version of "oh, that explains it," while neglecting the deeper warnings intended. [60]

Despite this type of criticism, the appearance of the trickster in a dream context is in agreement with the spiritual beliefs of Northern Cree tribes during the early nineteenth century. Historians have noted that for many of the contemporary Cree people this belief has not persisted and that, "such interaction is explicitly rejected by some Crees today who state that Wîsahkêcâhk does not appear in dreams, visions, or the shaking lodge."[61] However, it has also been noted that for the Cree people of the 1820's, "such beings appeared in dreams and visions and in the divination rituals of the conjuring shaking lodge, and they may predictably take on a variety of human, animal, and other forms in real-life encounters." [62] In Highway's play, the dream represents a prophetic vision of the dreamer, Zachary, who is the main character. Via his dream, Zachary is visited by a spiritual entity, the trickster, who, in turn, directs the metaphorical action within the play. This, of course, adds to the complexity of the content, theme, and symbolism of the play.

In the traditional myths, the trickster figure often interacts with the animate world from the perspective of an intruder or outsider. Typically, the trickster immerses himself into a community under false pretenses as an interloper. This tends to be an important aspect in terms of the didactic function of trickster mythology as it provides the audience with enough distance and objectivity that they are able to laugh and learn from trickster's outrageous behaviour or mistakes. The theory of marginality related to trickster mythology was initially proposed and popularized by trickster scholar, Barbara Babcock-Abrahams. Typically, in trickster mythology, the trickster transforms into original and creative human or animal forms unknown to the community and, therefore, enters a target community as a stranger. While Highway maintained the marginal attribute of the trickster in *The Rez Sisters*, he diverged from this trickster attribute in *Dry Lips Oughta Move to Kapuskasing*.

---

[59] Robert Enright, "Let Us Now Combine Mythologies: The Theatrical Art of Tomson Highway" Border Crossings 11 (December 1992), 26.

[60] Nigel Hunt, "Tracking the Trickster" Brick 37 (Autumn 1989), 60.

[61] Jennifer Brown and Robert Brightman (ed), The Orders of the Dreamed: George Nelson on Cree and Northern Ojibwa Religion and Myth, 1823. (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 1988), 126.

[62] Ibid., 120.

The characters portrayed by the trickster in *Dry Lips* are internal and recognizable female members of a fictional Native community. On the function of Nanabush within the play, Highway explained:

> In *Dry Lips*, the trickster Nanabush possesses the souls of three women, stereotypes from the most chauvinistic perspective - the whore, the mother, and the rape victim, who can be seen as tits, belly, and ass. [63]

Highway's application of the term "possession" to the trickster is a deviation from the more accurate transformational abilities of the trickster presented in traditional mythology. On this subject, Basil Johnston clearly noted that, "of all the powers he possessed, none was more singular that his power of transformation." [64] The trickster, unlike the traditional Cree spirit, *Windigo*, is not presented as a deity which possesses human beings. [65] Therefore, rather than the power of possession as interpreted by Highway, the trickster is more accurately associated with the power of transformation. Barbara Babcock-Abrahams argued that the marginal domain of the trickster is an essential requirement in trickster tales in order for the didactic content of the myths to be recognizable and meaningful to Native society. Highway's alteration of the trickster from a transformer to a possessor is important as it has a direct effect on marginal function of the trickster. Once the concept of possession replaces that of transformation, the relationship between the community and the trickster changes.

The power of possession as cited by Highway, created the possibility for him to inject the trickster directly into the target community as an internal community member. Once we observe the manifestation of this modified trickster trait, the familiar marginality of the trickster in the play becomes obliterated. If the marginality of the trickster disappears, than the didactic function of the trickster tale with regards to the audience members is compromised. The possession factor presented by Highway detracts from the marginal factor which, in traditional mythology, provides the audience with enough distance and objectivity to enable them to laugh at the trickster and his mishaps. In *Dry Lips Oughta Move to Kapuskasing*, the traditional and notorious 'outsider', who is easily and safely laughed at and learned from, becomes an 'insider' and a threat to the community as a whole. Native women, by extension of the female characters from within the fictional community of Wasaychigan Hill, may have had difficulty distancing themselves from the female characters possessed by Nanabush; therefore, they may also have had difficulty objectifying the didactic intentions of the playwright and the metaphorical content within the development of the plot. Highway's deviation from

---

[63] Jon Kaplan, "Tomson Highway: Ribald Comedy Set to Rattle Royal Alex" NOW (11-17 April 1991), 22.

[64] Basil Johnston, Ojibway Heritage (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1974), 19.

[65] The well known Cree/Ojibway cannibalistic spirit referred to as *Windigo* is noted for its ability to enter Native communities through the possession of community members and initiate canibalistic behaviour.

the marginality of the trickster may have contributed to the subjectivity of Native female audience members who stated that, "we're all uncomfortable with the prospect of this big fat woman flying through the Royal Alex this spring." [66] In recognition of the negative reactions to his play, Highway surmised that some women simply,

> ...misinterpreted my intentions and the trickster figure... You see, the trickster (the female -type god) was totally twisted out of shape by the male power in the play, and this play is from the viewpoint of the male - that is how men of today look at women. If women disagree with this then they can go to any porn shop or strip joint and see for themselves. [67]

IV - Audience Response

Criticism regarding the "misogynist" content in Highway's plays has been provoked not only by the violence against women in the play and the general physical depiction of the trickster's impersonation of female characters, but also by some of the dialogue in the script. The most disturbing dialogue is uttered by the character, Big Joey. After quietly observing the rape of Nanabush, Big Joey is confronted by Zachary and defends his failure to intervene in the following words:

> I hate them fuckin bitches. Because they - our women - took the fuckin power away from us faster than the FBI ever did. [68]

One could claim that the perspective of Big Joey reflects the remnants of cultural oppression and as such is a testament to the loss of the important and useful role of men within a once communal lifestyle: hunters, warriors, and protectors. Moreover, the infringement of non-Native societal structures and values has thrown the traditional communal structure into a state of uncertainty resulting in the presence of male insecurity at the community and spiritual level. This argument has been adopted by some critics who claimed:

> As the plot of *Dry Lips Oughta Move to Kapuskasing* makes clear, the poison Indian men must swallow is the consequences of their own insecurity about women and their lack of trust for the traditional values which kept their societies strong for centuries. [69]

Although this may be a formidable argument, many women who experienced the play and seemed to demonstrate a proficient understanding of the metaphorical content continued to publicly question Highway's intent as a Native playwright. Interestingly enough, Native writer, Lenore Keeshig-Tobias,

---

[66] Gerald Hannon, " Tomson and the Trickster" Toronto Life. 25-4 (March 1991), 81.

[67] Tomson Highway, *Personal Interview*. October 1994. Calagary, Alberta.

[68] Tomson Highway, Dry Lips Oughta Move to Kapuskasing. (Saskatoon: Fifth House Publishers, 1989), 120.

[69] Nigel Hunt, "Tracking the Trickster" Brick 37 (Autumn 1989), 60.

who co-founded *The Committee to Re-establish the Trickster* with Tomson Highway and Daniel David Moses in 1986, maintained:

> *Dry Lips Oughta Move to Kapuskasing* is frankly misogynist. I'm sure I'm not the only one who feels that way. But we're awed by the passion in the play, and we hesitate to talk about it. [70]

In defense of Highway's depiction of misogyny, Native writer Beth Cuthand claimed that misogyny exists within some Native communities and that Highway's perspective is not inaccurate, and his exposure of it was, above all, courageous. On this topic, she congratulated Highway and declared:

> In *Dry Lips Oughta Move to Kapuskasing*, misogyny is right out in the open. In that play, the trickster is a woman, done up like a whore, and she's always manipulating the men. And in one part, one of the male characters says, "Fuck your woman's power!" But, as a reflection of the reality in our society, I think that he is reflecting the misogyny of some Indian men. And we can't say, "Shut Up! Don't talk about this!" I mean, that is not what the artist does. It takes guts to reflect our society as it is. [71]

Cuthand, like Highway, believes that the negative aspects of the Native communities should not be censored from within, and that Native artists should expose the realities of Native communities in Canada despite the societal impact. At the other end of the spectrum, Native writer, Marie Annharte-Baker, cautioned her colleagues against an unbalanced disclosure of negativity related to Native communities for fear that it could perpetuate subtle racism within the non-Native community and inhibit racial pride in young Native people. Annharte-Baker dismissed the playwright's intentions when she contemplated the societal impact of Highway's play:

> I worry about the unintended. Do-gooders and white liberals have a wonderful way of forcing their awareness even on Indians....A yuppie would go home feeling relieved that Indians live on the rez and in the other part of the city. For whites and white-nosers, the play is a wonderful revelation about contradictions in Indian lives. But to a young Native person, the play might be another affront to one's identity. [72]

Annharte-Baker was also concerned that the content and dialogue in Highway's play focused inappropriately on the male perspective behind violence against women which ultimately provoked unintended sympathy from the audience for the male perpetrators. As a result, in her opinion, the play was negligent in its failure to address the larger and more disturbing issues concerning the healing of the female victims exposed to male violence. Annharte-Baker commented:

> While the men appear gross, they get sympathy. In this reversal of the usual implications of racism and sexism, we are forced to accept that it is the men who

---

[70] Gerald Hannon, " Tomson and the Trickster" Toronto Life. 25-4 (March 1991), 81.

[71] Hartman Lutz, "Beth Cuthand" Contemporary Challenges: Conversations with Canadian Native Authors. (Saskatoon: Fifth House Publishers, 1991), 36.

[72] Marie Annharte-Baker, "Angry Enough to Spit: Dry Lips Hurts More than You Know" Canadian Theatre Review. 68 (Fall 1991), 39.

> suffer from their own co-optation of Canadian hoser culture,...the boys exiled to the most powerless place, that of the perpetual observer. The women in the audience must again feel that it is the men who suffer more. ... Still, it is hard to resist the mesmerizing male dogma that is the backbone or wishbone of this play. But when the seduction wears off, you realize you've been had. [73]

Given the symbolic function of Nanabush in female forms, it is unlikely that the playwright intended the audience to interpret the female characters in *Dry Lips* as the realistic state of Native women in general. Within this play, Highway is pre-occupied with the theme regarding the oppression of Native spirituality. In correspondence to this theme, Native spirituality, according to Highway, is a matrilineal religion which, in the play, is symbolically represented by a female version of Nanabush. Similarly, Highway views Christianity as a patriarchal religion, and, therefore, the rape suffered by Nanabush at the hands of a male with a crucifix becomes a theological metaphor. It is the trickster as the pregnant Patsy Pegahmajig who is subjected to a violent rape when she is penetrated with a crucifix by the spiritually disturbed and fetal alcohol syndrome teen, Dicki-Bird. This disturbing and violent scene provoked the most negative response from both Native and non-Native audience members. In defense of Nanabush in *Dry Lips*, Highway stated:

> The rape episode is a metaphor for the collision of matriarchal religion and patriarchal force, with the rape of the god-as-woman by a male figure Until patriarchal theology goes out the window, women will be treated this way. It's a 2, 000-year old wound that has to be healed if our society and the earth are to survive. [74]

For many reasons, Native women, although they may have understood the metaphor on an intellectual level, were unable to distance themselves emotionally from the female community members possessed by the trickster. The emotional response invoked by the violence enforced on the trickster character may have been too overwhelming for the female members of the audience to objectively perceive Highway's metaphor. Again, Highway may have compromised the innate degree of marginality associated with the trickster, and as a result, it may have been difficult for women to objectify the subliminal messages contained within the rape scene. Highway was aware of the difficulties women were having with the play and attributed these difficulties to a failure on behalf of the public to accept a female trickster:

> *Dry Lips* is easily misunderstood, and that's partly my fault. Portraying trickster as a woman is as tantamount to portraying God as a woman. It's about the empowerment of the female principle, the reawakening of the feminine in men. [75]

---

[73] Marie Annehart Baker, "An Old Indian Trick is to Laugh" Canadian Theatre Review, 68 (Fall 1991), 88.

[74] Jon Kaplan, "Tomson Highway: Ribald Comedy Set to Rattle Royal Alex" NOW (11-17 April 1991), 22.

[75] Judy Steed, "My Way: Tomson Highway Opens at Alex" The Toronto Star (24 March 1991), D2.

Highway's observation appears to avoid an in-depth analysis of the objectionable audience responses from Native women. Most of the women did not seem to object to the idea of a female trickster at all but rather Highway's interpretation and portrayal of this female trickster in juxtaposition to his interpretation and portrayal of the male version of the trickster as he appears in *The Rez Sisters*.

Theatre is a very powerful communal and interactive art; therefore, it only makes sense that the negative responses to *Dry Lips Oughta Move to Kapuskasing* were more openly and strongly expressed by women who experienced the play in production rather than in print. In acknowledgment of the impact of the play, Highway included the Native proverb, "before the healing takes place, the poison must first be exposed," in both in the production program for the play and the published version of the script. In response to this proverb, a Native women retorted that its inclusion was simply a convenient way "to make enough commentary to be unaccountable for any inadvertent racist or sexist imagery." [76] In a conclusion to her critique on a performance of *Dry Lips Oughta Move to Kapuskasing*, Marie Annharte-Baker contended that, "we are still far too willing to participate in the violent fantasies about us. I began to mumble *megwetch* [thank-you] to the playwright for taking us this far in Native theatre. It is a small comfort to see poison. I hope the cure doesn't kill." [77]

Ultimately, Highway, although he claims to have been very hurt by some of the criticism he has received from Native women over his second play, declared:

> In a way, I'm glad of reactions like that because I'm tired of being patted on the head, In the end, that sort of reaction shows me that the audiences have been affected. The play's done its job. [78]

> I'm proud of the fact that I'm considered to be among a group of artists whose statements are unequivocally direct and honest. But it's also earned me a certain number of enemies, and after a few vicious attacks on your own person, you can be hurt. [79]

Ironically and despite his ability to place artistic value on negative criticism, the playwright has made an attempt to censor at least one of his Native critics. This occurred in 1991 when Highway had heard that some very strong negative criticism by Native writer, Marie Annharte-Baker, of *Dry Lips* was to be published in a Native issue of *Canadian Theatre Review*. The chief editor, Alan Filewood disclosed that,

> Interestingly enough, Highway tried to censor her criticism before it appeared in print in Canadian Theatre Review. ... After Baker spoke to him, Highway called me

---

[76] Marie Annharte-Baker, "An Old Indian Trick is to Laugh" Canadian Theatre Review, 68 (Fall 1991), 89.

[77] Marie Annehart Baker, "An Old Indian Trick is to Laugh" Canadian Theatre Review, 68 (Fall 1991), 89.

[78] Jon Kaplan, "Tomson Highway: Ribald Comedy Set to Rattle Royal Alex" NOW (11-17 April 1991), 22.

[79] Robert Enright, "Let Us Now Combine Mythologies: The Theatrical Art of Tomson Highway" Border Crossings 11 (December 1992), 24.

> to express his opposition to what he foresaw as a hostile response; he asked me to cancel the article because of the pain it would cause and because it would be divisive. My answer was that we had made a guarantee to Mojica and could not over ride it; it was not for us, as white editors, to determine what Native writers should say about each other. [80]

In his own defense, Highway claimed that *Dry Lips* was the opposite to what Native women were proclaiming; in fact, the play was written more as a eulogy to what has happened to Native women and, by extension, the female-based religion as a result of the process of colonialization. Based on Highway's original intentions and the male-dream context of the plot, it is accurate to conclude that his second play is about the exposure of misogyny and its metaphorical meanings in relation to theology rather than simply a misogynistic play with misogynist intentions. Highway claimed, on several occasions, that, through the content of *Dry Lips*, he was in fact calling for the re-establishment of matrilineal societies and theologies. In defense of his intentions as a playwright, Highway explained:

> To me, *Dry Lips* is about the return of God as a women. I wrote it as a hymn - of pain , yes - but a hymn to the beauty of women and the feminine energy that really needs to come back into its own if this world is going to survive. ... I wanted to represent the rape of a matriarchal, female-based religion - seen through the specifics of a little Indian reserve in Northern Ontario. It's the return of the goddess. That's what it was. A lot of people missed it, I think.[81]

---

[80] Alan Filewood, "Filewood Responds" The Drama Review 38•1 (Spring 1994), 37.

[81] Gerald Hannon, " Tomson and the Trickster" Toronto Life. 25•4 (March 1991), 81.

CONCLUSION

When examining modern interpretations of the trickster in contemporary Native writing as well as the cultural controversy which has erupted on this topic, the following statement by T.O. Beidelman is timely because it addresses the dynamic aspects regarding the shifting roles of the trickster in relation to the shifting values of particular societies:

> ... we should try to relate attributes and action of tricksters and similar figures to different and shifting roles and values within particular societies, especially avoiding judgments about these being good or bad, integrative of disruptive, central or liminal, rational or irrational, in any holistic sense. [1]

If one abides by Beidelman's suggestion that the trickster's shifting role reflects the shifting values of the society, then contemporary changes to the trickster are relevant and can, therefore, be studied within the context of a contemporary Native society. However, this concept introduces several interesting issues to be deliberated by the Native community. For example: Has Native society changed to the degree where it is necessary to redefine the trickster for the purpose of relevancy in meet meeting the cultural needs of a contemporary Native society? What kinds of changes to the trickster character are necessary and/ or acceptable? Who's responsibility or right is it to redefine this traditional figure which lies at the core of mythological cultural teachings?

Like the trickster, the aesthetic principles behind Tomson Highway's theatre seem paradoxically ambiguous. On the one hand, Highway is a passionate crusader for the betterment of Native people. He has dedicated himself to using the theatre as a device in order to revitalize and disseminate the traditional mythology of Native people as a means of re-establishing cultural relevance, vitality, and pride. On the other hand, he is a passionate artist who applies the concept of artistic freedom to his theatrical creations, and subsequently, objects to the concept of cultural censorship from the Native community. Highway's philosophy of artistic freedom seems diametrically opposed to his didactic intentions as a playwright. His dilemma results in a rendition of the trickster is not in complete

---

[1] T.O. Beidelman, "The Moral Imagination of the Kaguru: Some Thoughts on Tricksters, Translations and Comparative Analysis" American Ethnologist. (American Anthropologist Association, 1980), 38.

synchronization with the traditional figure as identified and acknowledged within Cree and/or Ojibway mythology.

There is no doubt that Highway's plays are brilliantly constructed and powerful artistic contributions to Canadian theatre. His talent as a playwright, director, and musician radiates through his scripts. Due to Highway's popularity as a well respected playwright in Canada, his plays are widely accessible to the general populous. Consequently, his depiction of Native people and culture has made many critics, colleagues, and spectators nervous because, as a Native, Highway is automatically assigned a degree of authority by the general public on the authenticity of his subject matter. One particular critic of Highway, Susan Bennett, noted:

> As oral forms have become consumer products directed at zealous audiences for post-colonial texts,...its worth remembering that these audiences are primarily the white-dominated academy and the West-woman's stories have become men's performances. [2]

Bennett's observation is interesting as she focused on the consumerism of Native theatre and art in general as related to the societal concerns provoked by Highway's portrayal of Native women. She also argued that Highway's plays confirm, for the general public, "negative stereotypes perpetuated in a more obviously dominant cultural practice."[3] Like many critics of Tomson Highway, Bennett has focused her criticism on the societal and feminist issues surrounding the impact of his plays. In addition, Native female critics have also expressed concern over the impact of Highway's presumed sexist and stereotypical depiction of Native women. Generally, the negative criticism has not, to date, examined the overall cultural implications of Highway's interpretation of the trickster as the Native androgynous version of god. Despite his metaphorical intent, one cannot deny Highway's negative depiction of women in *Dry Lips Oughta Move to Kapuskasing*, yet the exploration of the cultural implication with respect to the dissemination of tribal mythology has been generally overlooked in the published discourse on Highway.

Highway's plays have had a very strong impact on the development of Native literature in Canada. His rendition of the trickster, to which he has applied interpretive modification, has been disseminated not only through his work, but through the work of his colleagues and his critics. Herein lies the enigmatic dilemma regarding the artistic responsibility of the Native artist and the impact of his plays on Native culture as it relates to mythology in general. In most of the critical discourse on Highway,

---

[2] Susan Bennett, "Subject to the Tourist Gaze: A Response to Weesageechuk Begins t Dance." The Drama Review 3781 (Spring 1993), 10

[3] Susan Bennett, "Subject to the Tourist Gaze: A Response to Weesageechuk Begins t Dance." The Drama Review 3781 (Spring 1993), 10.

scholars have, without question, accepted, adopted, and popularized Highway's androgynous god-like trickster. The consequence is that the lines between the traditional storytellers, who are responsible for the preservation and dissemination of Native mythology, and the contemporary Native writers are becoming more and more obscure as writers like Highway begin to dominate the disclosure of Native mythology.

The trickster is ultimately a reflection of society and the possibilities of human existence within it. In order to meet the needs of society, the use and adaptation of the trickster in contemporary literature or modern mythology has been acceptable in the past with the provision that certain boundaries related to the attributes and function of the trickster are respected and maintained. Highway has upset these boundaries through his modification of the trickster's gender, obscuring his divinity, and manipulating his marginality. As a result, select members of the Native community, especially the traditionalists and women, may not be prepared to embrace Highway's trickster as it may not be a reflection of society as a whole. It is the concern over cultural accuracy and dissemination of cultural material in contemporary writing that provoked the following comment from Marie Annharte-Baker, who felt it necessary to advise that,

> When we see a trickster on the stage in an Aboriginal cultural production, we must become aware not only of the special cultural circumstance of that creation and its circular totality, we must know something of the playwright, actor, director, or the events of the day which give inspiration to a particular rendition. You are forced to be particular to understand. It is so tempting to recite eulogies to the Trickster all the while giving evidence of actual ignorance of the subject. [4]

In her comment, Annharte-Baker felt it necessary to qualify specific interpretations of the trickster for the public in order to clarify the difference between individual renditions versus the traditional trickster. She, therefore, attempted to diffuse the expectation of cultural accuracy away from the playwright and the content of his drama.

Through Highway's work, what we may be witnessing at this early stage in the development of Native theatre and Native literature in Canada is the trickster in transition. Although this modern rendition of then trickster is not completely acceptable to Native people across Canada, Native writers, inspired by Highway's success as a playwright, are highly influenced by his work and his trickster. Native writer, Beth Cuthand defended Highway and his contribution to Native literature when she stated:

> You've got to pay attention to Tomson Highway regardless of what you think of him, of his subject matter. He stands alone as a playwright! I know that a lot of Native

---

[4] Marie Annharte-Baker., " An Old Indian Trick is to Laugh." Canadian Theatre Review, 68 (Fall 1991), 48.

> women, Indian women, are sensitive about the way he portrays women, but I think he was very brave to do what he did with *The Rez Sisters*. [5]

Cuthand's statement is valuable as she reiterates two important points. Highway, as a Native playwright does stand alone, and his perspective as a Native person remains a valid Native perspective coloured by his own life experiences from within his culture and his art. In addition, Highway has demonstrated courage in addressing some of the undeniable negative aspects of contemporary Native life. Although the societal repercussions of his work have been contemplated, the cultural repercussions are yet to be determined. Highway has initiated an important change which has just started to have an impact on the interpretation and adaptation of Native mythology. The Canadian theatre scene may be both the witness to and setting for the transition of the trickster as a more contemporary androgynous being. However, while Highway's trickster has been adopted by some Native contemporaries, it remains to be seen whether or not the Native communities as a whole are prepared to embrace his rendition. Whatever the outcome, the nature the future trickster will be a reflective statement on the state of contemporary Canadian Native society and culture. Like the prominent Native artist, Norval Morrisseau, Tomson Highway's artistic contributions have indeed been subjected to severe criticism from members of the Native community. Ironically, however, and unlike Morrisseau, this criticism is not directed against his disclosure of sacred tribal truths but rather against his use or misuse of a sacred tribal figure for the exposure of more contemporary tribal secrets.

---

[5] Hartman Lutz, "Beth Cuthand" Contemporary Challenges: Conversations with Canadian Native Authors. (Saskatoon: Fifth House Publishers, 1991), 35.

NOTE ON BIBLIOGRAPHY

The thesis bibliography is organized into three separate sections in accordance to different subject areas related to the research process. For easier reference purposes, the bibliography includes the following sections:

1) Primary Sources:
- sources written by Tomson Highway and/or transcribed by the author from to live interviews or special presentations

2) Articles Reviews and Production Information:
- secondary sources on Tomson Highway's life, his work and the various productions of his plays

3) General Aesthetics of Native Art and Trickster Mythology:
- selected secondary and primary research related to research on the traditional trickster and the aesthetics of Native art in general

SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY

Primary Sources:

Highway, Tomson. Dry Lips Oughta Move to Kapuskasing. Saskatoon, Saskatchewan: Fifth House Publishers, 1989.

Highway, Tomson. "On Native Mythology" Theatrum. 6 (Spring 1987): 29-33.

Highway, Tomson. *Personal Interview.* 31 October 1994. Calgary, Alberta.

Highway, Tomson. "Portrait of an Aboriginal Artist" Human Rights Forum. 4 •I•1 (Winter 1994): 4-5.

Highway, Tomson. *Special Presentation.* 23 February 1993. University of Calgary. Calgary, Alberta.

Highway, Tomson. *Special Presentation.* 31 October 1994. Mount Royal College. Calgary, Alberta.

Highway, Tomson. The Rez Sisters. Saskatoon, Saskatchewan: Fifth House Publishers, 1988.

Articles, Reviews, and Production Information

Annharte-Baker, Marie. "Carte Blanche: Angry Enough to Spit, But With *Dry Lips,* It Hurts More Than You Know." Canadian Theatre Review. 68 (Fall 1991): 88-89.

Bashford, Lucy. "Drama Reviews: Dry Lips Oughta Move to Kapuskasing." Malahat Review. 91 (June 1990): 109-110.

Bemrose, John. "Highway of Hope." Macleans. 102•19 (8 May 1989): 62.

Bemrose, John. "Native Grace." Macleans. 104 •17 (29 April 1991):60-61.

Bennett, Susan. "Subject to the Tourist Gaze: A Response to Weesageechak Begins to Dance." The Drama Review. 37•1 (Spring 1993):9-12.

Bolt, Carol. "No Wings Yet" Books in Canada. 18•2 (March 1989): 26.

Cashman, Cheryl. "Toronto's Zanies" Canadian Theatre Review. 67 (Summer 1991): 22-38.

Chapman, Geoff. "Royal Treatment for Dry Lips: Native Writer's Dream Fable is Alive and Well and Brimful of Power." The Toronto Star. 14 April 1991: J1.

Chapman, Geoff. "Royal Treatment for Dry Lips: Native Writer's Dream Fable is Alive and Well and Brimful of Power." The Toronto Star. 14 April 1991: J1.

Conlogue, Ray. "An Emotionally Rivoting Dry Lips: Loose Strands are not Drawn Together Satisfactorily" Globe and Mail . 24 April 1989: A17.

Conlogue, Ray. "Indigenous Celebration Delightful, Disturbing" Globe and Mail. 5 Aug 1982: A17.

Conologue, Ray. "Mixing Spirits, Bingo, and Genius" Globe and Mail. 21 November 1987: C5.

Coulbourn, John. "A Triumph: Dry Lips Brings Metro winner." Ottawa Sun. 14 April, 1991: 58.

Crew, Robert. "Highway Leads Back to True Culture of North America." The Toronto Star. 15 April 1989: J1, J4.

Cushman, Robert. "From Ideal to Painfully Real" Globe and Mail. 15 April 1991: C3.

Debenham, Diane. "Native People in Contemporary Canadian Drama" Canadian Drama. 14•2 (1988): 137-159.

Drainie, Bronwyn. "Highway Play Challenging Stop on the Road to Understanding" Globe and Mail. 22 April 1991: C1

Dry Lips Oughta Move to Kapuskasing. Program. *Royal Alexandra Theatre*, Ottawa. April 18, 1991.

Dry Lips Oughta Move to Kapuskasing. Program. *Theatre Passe Muraille* Toronto. April 21, 1989.

Edmonds, Eve. "Dry Lips Scores: Play on Target" Ottawa Sun. 3 March 1991: 33

Enright, Robert. "Let Us Now Combine Mythologies: The Theatrical Art of Tomson Highway." Border Crossings. 11•4 (December 1992): 22-27.

Fee, Margery. "Drama: The Rez Sisters" Malahat Review. 91 (June 1990): 107-108.

Ferguson, Ted. "Native Son" Imperial Oil Review. 73•395 (Winter 1989): 18-20.

Filewood, Alan. "Filewood Responds" The Drama Review. .38•1 (Spring 1994): 36-37.

Godfrey, Stephen. "Trip From Comedy to Drama a Worthwhile, If Bumpy, Ride" Globe and Mail. 9 March 1991: C2.

Grant, Agnes. "Canadian Native Literature: The Drama of George Ryga and Tomson Highway" Australian Canadian Studies: A Journal for the Humanities and Social Sciences. 10•2 (1992): 37-56.

Grey Eyes, Carol. "Interview with Tomson Highway" The Runner. (Spring 1994): 3-8.

Hannon, Gerald. "Tomson and the Trickster" Toronto Life. 25•4 (March 1991):.28-31, 35-38, 41-44, 81-83.

Hannon, Gerald. "Writes with Wolves" The National Gay and Lesbian Newsmagazine. 579 (18 June 1991): 76-77.

Henderson, Bill. "Henderson Responds." The Drama Review. 37•1 (Spring 1993): 16-17.

Hunt, Nigel. "Tracking the Trickster" Brick. 37 (Autumn 1989): 58-60.

Johnston, Denis W. "Lines and Circles: The Rez Plays of Tomson Highway" Canadian Literature. 124/125 (Spring/Summer 1990): 254-264.

Kaplan, Jon. "Tomson Highway: Ribald Reservation Comedy Set to Rattle Royal Alex" NOW. 11•17 April 1991: 22.

Kelly, M. T. "The Trickster" This Magazine. 21•1 (March/April 1987): 40.

Lawless, Jill. "Theatre Reviews: Dry Lips Oughta Move to Kapuskasing" NOW. 10•32 (18-24 April 1991): 41.

Lawrence, Bea. "Rez Sister Gets Invitation to Play International Festival Overseas" Windspeaker. 6•19 (1 July 1993): 8.

Leonard, Paul. Cornelia Smith and Jim Lotz. "More to Success Than Size and Opulence" Globe and Mail. 27 April 1991: D7.

Linklater, Doris. "Linklater Responds" The Drama Review. 37•1 (Spring 1993): 15-16.

Loucks, Bryan. "Another Glimpse: Excerpts from a Conversation with Tomson Highway." Canadian Theatre Review. 68 (Fall 1991): 9-11.

Lutz, Hartmut. Contemporary Challenges: Conversations with Canadian Native Authors. Saskatoon: Fifth House Publishers, 1991.

Maufort, Marc. "Recognizing Differences in Canadian Drama: Tomson Highway's Poetic Realism" British Journal of Canadian Studies. 8•2 (1993): 231-240.

Mazey, Steven. "Dry Lips - Cree playwright Chronicles Clash of Religions, Cultures" The Ottawa Citizen. 24 Feb. 1991: D1-2.

McLaughlin, Gordon. "Cree Writer on World Stage: Interview with Tomson Highway" Financial Post and Magazine. 13 January 1992: S10.

Mojica, Monique. "Theatrical Diversity on Turtle Island: A Tool Towards the Healing" Canadian Theatre Review. 68 (Fall, 1991): 3.

Moses, Daniel David. "The Trickster Theatre of Tomson Highway" Canadian Fiction Magazine. 60 (Summer 1987): 83-88.

Newman, Alex. "Play Reviews: Blood Intimacy: Oh, What a Tangled Mess We Weave." Performing Arts 25•2 (April/Spring 1989): 48.

Preston, Jennifer. "Preston Responds" The Drama Review. 3•1 (Spring 1993): 13-15.

Preston, Jennifer. "Weesageechak Begins Dance: Native Earth Performing Arts Inc." The Drama Reivew. 36•2 (Spring 1992): 135-159.

Prokosh, Kevin. "Highway of Hope: Native Playwright Uses Theatre as the Road to Soulfulness" Winnipeg Free Press. 20 October 1990: 25.

Prokosh, Kevin. "Highway Runs into Creative Traffic Jam." Winnipeg Free Press. 25 June 1992: C28.

Schechener, Richard. "Schechner Responds" The Drama Review. 37•1 (Spring 1993): 17.

Scott, Jay. "Cross Current: Dry Lips' Loss of Intimacy Transforms Visceral Images into Picturesque Tableaux" Globe and Mail. 22 April 1991: C1.

Staff and Canadian Press. "Order of Canada Honours Announced" The Globe and Mail. 7 January 1994: A7.

Steed, Judy. "My Way: Tomson Highway Opens at Alex" The Toronto Star. 24 March 1991: D1-D2.

The Rez Sisters: Program: *Alberta Theatre Arts Projects*. Calgary, Alberta. September 16 - October 20, 1990.

Tuharsky, Anita J. "Play Promotes Racism, Sexism and Oppression" Windspeaker. 9•1 (March 29 1991):5.

Wagner, Vit. "Native Earth Play has a Message for All " Toronto Star. 10 Feb 1989: E 16.

Wallace, Robert. Producing Marginality: Theatre and Criticism in Canada. Saskatoon, Saskatchewan: Fifth House Publishers, 1990

"We love Canada Because..." Chatelaine. 65 (July 1992): 29-33.

Wigston, Nancy. "Nanabush in the City: A Profile of Tomson Highway" Books in Canada. 18•2 (March 1989): 7-9.

Wilson, Ann. "Tomson Highway" In Other Solitudes: Canadian Multiculturalism Fiction. Ed. Linda Hutcheson, and Marion Richmond.Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1990. p. 351-355.

Yhap, Beverly. "On Their Own Terms" Canadian Theatre Review. 56 (Fall 1988): 25-30.

Oral Literature and Trickster Mythology:

Annharte-Baker, Marie. "An Old Indian Trick is to Laugh" Canadian Theatre Review. 68 (Fall 1991): 88-89.

Armstrong, Jeannette and Douglas Cardinal. The Native Creative Process. Penticton BC: Theytus Books, 1991.

Babcock-Abrahams, Barbara. " A Tolerated Margin of Mess: The Trickster Tales Reconsidered" Journal of the Folklore Institute. 11 (1974-75): 147-86.

Balinger, Franchot. "Living Sideways: Social Themes and Social Relations in Native American Trickster Tales" American Indian Quarterly. 13 (1989): 15-30.

Beck, Peggy V. "In the Company of Myth and Laughter" The Magazine of Myth and Tradition. 11•3 (August 1986): 18-25.

Beidelman, T.O. "The Moral Imagination of the Kaguru: Some Thoughts on Tricksters, Translation, and Comparative Analysis." American Ethnologist. American Anthropological Association., 1980: 27-41.

Boas, Franz. Introduction. Traditions of the Thompson River Indians of British Columbia. By James Teit New York: The American Folklore Society / Houghton, Mifflin and Company, 1898.

Bright, William (ed) Coyote Stories: Native American Texts Series, Monograph No. 1. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978.

Brown, Jennifer S.H., and Robert Brightman. The Orders of the Dreamed: George Nelson on Cree and Northern Ojibwa Religion and Myth, 1823. Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 1988.

Carroll, Michael P. "Levi-Strauss, Freud, and the Trickster: A New Perspective Upon an Old Probem" American Ethnologist. 8•2 (May 1981): 301-313.

Crossley-Holland, Kevin. The Norse Myths. London: The Folio Society, 1989.

Deloria, Vine. Jr. God is Red. New York: Grosset and Dunlap, 1973.

Diamond, Stanly. Introductory Essay. The Trickster: A Study in American Indian Mythology. By Paul Radin. New York: Schocken Books, 1972.

Dickson-Brown., Roger. "The Art and Importance of N. Scott Momaday" The Southern Review. 8•2 (1978): 30-45.

Doueihi, Anne. "Trickster: On Inhabiting the Space between Discourse and Story Soundings" An Interdisciplinary Journal. 67•3 (Fall 1984): 283-311.

Evers, Dr. Larry. "A Conversation with N. Scott Momoday" Sun Tracks. 2•2 (1976): 18-21.

Echlin, Kimberly. The Translation of Ojibway: The Nanabush Myths. York University, Toronto, 1982. Dissertation Abstracts International (1982 April) 43•10: 3306 - A.

Favel, Floyd. *Personal Interview*. Edmonton, Alberta. 5 April 1992.

Gill, Sam D., (ed) Native American Traditions: Sources and Interpretations. California: Wadsworth Publishing Company, 1983.

Grant, Agnes (ed) Our Bit of Truth: Anthology of Canadian Native Literature. Manitoba: Pemmican Publication Inc., 1990.

Grottanelli, Cristiano. "Tricksters, Scapegoats, Champions, Saviors" History of Religions. 23•2 (November 1983): 117-139.

Gunn-Allen, Paula. (ed) Studies in American Indian Literature: Critical Essays and Course Designs. New York: The Modern Language Association of America, 1983.

Houle, Robert. "Odjig: An Artist's Transition" Native Art in Canada: The Native Perspective. 3•2, 1978.

Hurley, Michael. "Wocaousta as Trickster: The Enemy of Boundaries" Journal of Canadian Studies. 26•3 (Fall, 1991): 68-79.

Johnson, Basil. Ojibwa Heritage. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1974.

Jung, Carl G. "On the Psychology of the Trickster Figure" The Trickster. By Paul Radin. New York: Schocken Books, 1972.

Kendall, Martha B. (ed) Coyote Stories II: International Journal of American Linguistics Native American Texts Series Monograph No. 6. Ann Arbor Michigan: University of Chicago Press, 1980.

Kerenyi, Karl. "The Trickster in Relation to Greek Mythology" The Trickster: A Study in American Indian Mythology. By Paul Radin. New York: Schocken Books, 1972.

King, Thomas. (ed) All My Relations: An Anthology of Contemporary Native Fiction. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart Inc, 1990.

King, Thomas. "Introduction: An Anthology of Canadian Native Fiction" Canadian Fiction Magazine. 60 (Spring 1987): 4-10.

Koepping, Klaus-Peter. "Absurdity and Hidden Truth: Cunning Intelligence and Grotesque Body Images as Manifestations of the Trickster" History fo Religions. 24•3 (Feb. 1985): p. 191-214.

Kroeber, Karl et al. Traditional American Indian Literatures: Texts and Interpretations Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1981.

Levi-Straus, Claude. Structural Anthroplogy. New York: Basic Books Inc., 1963.

Messer, Ron. "A Jungian Interpretation of the Relationship of Culture: Hero and Trickster Figure within Chippwa Mythology." Studies in Religion/ Sciences Religieuses: Revue Canadienne / A Canadian Journal .11•3 (Summer, 1982): 309-320.

Millar, Jay. Introduction to the Bison Book Edition. Coyote Stories. By Mourning Dove. (1933) Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1990.

Momaday, N. Scott. " An American Land Ethic" In Ecotactics. Ed. John C. Mitchell and Constance L. Stallings New York: Pocket Books, 1970: 97-105.

Momaday, N. Scott. "The Man Made of Words" In Native American Traditions. Ed. Sam D. Gill California: Wadsworth Publishing Company, 1983: 44-53.

Mourning Dove. Coyote Stories. (1933) Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1990.

Petrone, Penny. Native Literature in Canada: From Oral Tradition to the Present. Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1990.

Radin, Paul. The Tricskter: A Study in American Indian Mythology. (1956) New York: Schocken Books, 1972.

Ray, Carl. and James Stevens. Sacred Legends of the Sandy Lake Cree. (1971) Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1988.

Ricketts, Mac Linscott. "The North American Indian Trickster" History of Religions. 5 (1965-66): 321-350.

Sayre, Robert F. "Trickster" North Dakota Quarterly. 53•2 (Spring 1985): 68-81.

Southcott, Mary E., The Sound of the Drum: The Sacred Art of the Anishnabec. Erin Ontario: Boston Mills Press, 1984.

Street, Brian V. "The Trickster Theme: Winnebago and Azande" In Zande Themes. Ed. Andre Singer and Brian V. Street. Great Britian: Basil Blackwell, 1972: 82-104.

Strelke, Barbara. "N. Scott Momaday: Racial Memory and Individual Imagination." In Literature of the American Indians: Views and Interpretations. Ed. Abraham Chapman New York: New American Library, 1975: 348-357.

Vizenor, Gerald. "Trickster Discourse" American Indian Quarterly. 14 (Summer, 1990): 277-287.

Wiget, Andrew. "His Life in his Tail: The Native American Trickster and the Literature of Possibility" In Redefining American Literary History. Ed. LaVonne Brown Ruoff and Jerry W. Ward Jr., New York: The Modern Language Association of America, 1990: 83-96.

APPENDIX I - PERSONAL INTERVIEW WITH TOMSON HIGHWAY
October 31, 1994 Highlander Hotel. Calgary, Alberta

Q: What is your opinion on the appropriation of voice?

A: There is nothing I can do about it except to keep on writing.

Q: In developing your plays, who is your primary audience?

A: Oh, Everyone. The trick is to write your stuff in such a way that everyone will understand. I've studied long enough (I have two degrees) to know that I write in such a way that everyone can understand no matter where they come from.

Q: How has your exposure to 'street life' and the field of social work influenced your work?

A: I think that the position of an artist is a very serious responsibility, and we have an opportunity to influence or inspire social change.

Q: Do you have any concerns about the new Native writers in Canada?

A: My concern is that we need to begin to control our voices. Our voices are being whitewashed in TV, short stories, and novels. TV is the biggest influence in the North, and that is where we need to have more control.

Q: How do you feel about the Native literary movement in Canada?

A: The Native literary movement is only about 10 years old; its very young - in it's infancy. Most of us are in our late 20's, 30's, or early 40's, and what we're writing now is just baby stuff. When we reach our 80's, I am confident that the works that will be produced will be masterpieces.

Q: You have had both negative and positive criticism. What are your feelings towards critics in general ?

A: I think that they should criticize people as much as possible. I think critics are necessary. I think we should all be criticized; a little humility never hurt anyone; humility is good. Some (*critics*) of them are very good; some are not very good. They are good if they do their research and work very hard at their craft. Some of them are lousy. But ultimately, it (*criticism*) is very necessary, and I hope there's more critics that really respect their medium and also have respect for the artists who are exercising and exploring their own medium. I hope they have the ability to criticize the material on the basis of the quality of the craft as opposed to the personality of the artist. Some critics can be petty and stupid and don't give a damn about the art. This is wasteful, wasteful energy.

Q: How do you feel about having the mainstream artists and producers approach Native content, (which often results in the hybrid Hollywood or stereotyped portrayal of Native life) ?

A: I think that we have to get ourselves in a position of financial control, so that we can decide the style and the way we handle how we are being portrayed rather than the people of Hollywood: for example, *The Last of the Mohicans* or *Princess Pocahontas* - that's not Native. A classic example of this is the movie, *Agokuk*, a movie about the Inuit. It was made by non-Native people with Chinese actors and non native producers and directors. What really pissed me off was that all over Paris, France (I was on vacation at the time) people were saying, "the first Inuit movie". This was an outrageous lie. I was really astonished at how unprincipled these people were.

Q: Some Native people have spoken out in protest at the sexual explicitness and language used in your plays. You have been quite ardent in your responses. What was your reasoning?

A: I think that people who are uptight about sexuality should be shocked into reality. - shocked into enjoying it. There is so much hypocrisy around the area of sexuality, and this hypocrisy is what has damaged so many people. I have three points to make on the issue of sexuality: 1) I think that the word "fuck" is going to be around forever, 2) Fucking is fun, 3) The act of fucking is going to be with us for the rest of creation, so enjoy it, be honest about it, face it, and don't cry about it. It is the hypocritical behavior that has hurt us because it has manifested itself into child molestation, rape, and men who beat their wives on a weekly basis because they just can't handle their pasts.

Q: There are many types of literary mediums. What has inspired you to write / create for the theatre?

A: Essentially, I come from an era or background where the first literature was oral. The first stories that I was exposed to I didn't read, I heard. People were always telling me stories - like trickster stories. The essential ingredient in storytelling is the spoken word. So theatre is just a natural extension of that oral tradition, which is the spoken word used with living actors and sets and costumes and lights and music. But the essence in theatre is still the spoken word as told by one living person to another - which necessitates a spiritual exchange. This , you don't get in film. Film is not a spiritual exchange; it's like sedentary inanimate material. Whenever there is an exchange between two living things of flesh (animate objects) communicating directly, then there is a spiritual exchange or a communion of form. That is what makes theatre important.

Q: Anthropologists and scholars have collected ethnographic material and published trickster stories. After reviewing a famous collection by Paul Radin, an elder once remarked, "It is frozen". What are your feelings on literate publications involving the trickster figure?

A: Theatre is different. That's why I picked theatre. Every time you go to a show, it's not the same interpretation. I mean the words are sometimes written down for theatre; but, in theatre, the momentum of the words is kept alive. I guess what the elder has said is true, and I agree to a certain extent . However, theatre is like putting a chicken into the freezer and freezing it, you can always take the chicken out of the freezer, spice it up, and eat it, or fuck it. In the theatre, the art is never finished, and it's still alive. That's why I do theatre and will always do theatre.

Q: How do you view the relationship between the theatre and the trickster figure of oral mythology ?

A: Well, I think theatre is one way to revitalize the trickster. Theatre is one possible way that the young people can explore their own contemporary reality, and God knows they have a right to express it. I know it upsets some elders (some of the stuff that we've done), but that's par for the course. That's what we feel as artists, and that is what the young people of this country feel. Therefore, they have to tell about it because the only choice some of them have is to tell about it or kill themselves, and we (*artists*) have to tell about it.

Q: Who taught you about the trickster?

A: My parents.

Q: Was traditional storytelling a fairly common practice in your community?

A: The stories were underground; they were secret; they were censored. I heard little bits of stories as a child; there were just a few of them that survived and filtered through. And then in my twenties, after I finished University and started working for Native organizations, I began to meet other Indian people and elders who hadn't been christianized necessarily as much as my parents had, or my reserve had, and I did lots of reading.

Q: In your words, who is the trickster?

A: The trickster is sort of a mediator between the Great spirit and mankind, although that is an unfortunate term as is excludes women, but "people". The trickster is half man /half god or half women/half god. The European Language is so gender limited. He is a clown, a laughing god. He is the interpreter of a God who knows how to laugh or have a good time in spite of all the shit we've been through. Where as in Christianity, God doesn't know how to laugh - a god who has never drank a bottle of beer in his life.

Q: Is your heritage strictly Cree or part Ojibwe?

A: I am totally Cree. I am living in Ojibwe territory. On the fictional reserve that I created in my plays, there is a mixture of Cree and Ojibwe people.

Q: How much has Native Mythology inspired you as an artist?.

A: It is a part of every aspect of my work including the content, form, meaning, and symbolism. I think that the use of mythological symbolism is the most powerful way to tell stories - the most important way of entering people's consciousness and sub-consciousness; it penetrates and touches them to the core. If you have a man walking down the street and you portray him as a trickster walking down the street, then with that license, you have the ability to bring God right into your kitchen. And when God picks up a cup of tea, the gesture of picking up this cup of tea, as simple as it is, becomes universally potent and powerful.

Q: Is the trickster a representation of every man?

A: Yes - and every woman

Q: How accessible is Native mythology and symbolism to a non-Native audience?

A: I think what happens is that non-Native people understand it ultimately on a subconscious level - the moment it sticks to them. They may not understand the play intellectually the moment they see it or read it, but from the moment that it sticks with them, it is with them for a life-time. It enters their psyche, and it stays there; it becomes imbedded permanently. I think it takes them back through a collective memory to a point beyond their Christian beginnings (which is only 2, 000 years old in Europe compared to 20, 000 years of Native spirituality on this continent called Turtle Island) when those pagan gods were alive and totally functional. Europeans had trickster figures too - tricksters who could be male and/or female. The most matrilineal institutional religion in history, which was Christianity, worked so hard at wiping out, and brutally wiping out, all those earth based female religions. So I take non-Native back to that time, I think. There is still some message there for them that they understand. These plays can have such an effect right around the world, not just here.

Q: Has your negative life experiences with Christianity provided an underlying theme to your work?

A: Yes. I' ve become very much aware that I'm shaking a lot of trees and contributing to a shift in the balance of power, and that those in power therefore are threatened. There will probably will be a backlash, but we're ready for it.

Q: What do you think about corporate sponsorship and publishers controlling Native art and its content?

A: That's what I mean about Native people needing to take control of their own productions of art. I have always been the one in control in my own work. I have been my own producer, designer, and writer, and director. We can't sit around waiting for phone calls.

Q: You have interpreted the Trickster as a Gender-free being. Is this your own interpretation or do you feel this is in line with the original Cree mythology ?

A: It is something that comes from my study of Native languages, and it comes from the fact that I speak fluent Cree (my first language is Cree), so I have had the privilege of having taken a very close and intimate look at the structure of both languages. I've heard people say that my interpretation is wrong. So, yes, it does come from me, but this gender idea is based the research and conclusions that I have come up with, and I offer them up for challenge - they should be challenged. The other part of it is that even in Christian teachings God is everywhere and everything. People also need to remember that ethnographers were primarily male and often edited or censored the mythology that was published. The female trickster may have been edited out just like the female authors of the bible were completely obliterated: edited out the book.

Q: Has your own sexual orientation influenced your interpretation of the trickster?

A: Yes. However, I don't see myself as gender-free, rather as a multi-gendered person.

Q: Did the native women who reacted negatively to your play, *Dry Lips*, misinterpret your intentions or interpretations of the trickster?

A: Yes, I think they misinterpreted my intentions and the trickster figure. I think that the very concept of god as a women was misinterpreted. You see, the trickster (the female type of god) was totally twisted out of shape by the male power in the play, and this play is from the viewpoint of the male - that is how men of today look at women. If women disagree with this then they can go to any porn shop or strip joint and see for themselves. It's sick. Also, the scene in *Dry Lips*. where the birth of Dicki-Bird's birth occurs on a juke box in a bar while the mother is so drunk that she is unaware that her water has broken, represents the lowest point in Native history. From here, we can only move upwards. It is all of our responsibility to look at the ugliness and try to improve where we as a people, and especially our women who are sacred life givers, are at. It is our job as artists to expose any ugliness and hypocrisy.

Q: Why do you think women identified so much with Trickster?

A: Because it touched them - - deeply. It is not my vision of women. It is men who see them that way. In fact, at the end, there is this beautiful ravishing women who enters the stage with her female baby, and God has come back as a women - its the return of the god as a women, Hera. I was shocked that most of the audience knew very little about Greek mythology. They had no idea who Hera was. I find it fascinating that 95% of people liked *Dry Lips*, yet critics always have to bring up the 5% who didn't.

Q: What is your response to your Native women colleagues who criticized the play?

A: Why don't they write their own interpretation of the trickster, find a theatre, put it together, find designers, directors, and etc. I say, "go for it!"

Q: What is the function of the trickster?

A: The trickster teaches us about the reason for existence on the planet - that in spite of all the pain and sorrow that goes on in this world, she is the laughing goddess who still remembers how to laugh. No one on this earth is able to capture or explain the ambiguity of the trickster.

Q: Do you feel you have captured the duality of Creator and Destroyer?

A: Yes. The trickster is like human beings. We all have the potential for both good and evil and the power of creation or destruction.

Q: You once said that Rene Highway made trickster dance? Is something missing in *The Rez Sisters* now?

A: Yes, but theatre is a interpretive art; the creative part is the writer , and the interpretive part is the actor, designers, and directors.

APPENDIX II - TOMSON HIGHWAY PRESENTATION, Mount Royal College, October 31, 1994

NOTE:
The following information is a selection of Highway statements transcribed from a public presentation to the Mount Royal College student body. Some of the quotes are excepts from the actual presentation while others are Highway's responses to questions from the audience. The majority of this particular presentation focused on Highway's new musical, Rose, which was recently workshopped in Toronto. Highway provided brief biographical information as well as an artistic profile of his previous work prior to playing music and reading from his new script.

Brief Synopsis of Work

The Rez Sisters is about 7 women and a male reincarnation of the trickster: Re - the male incarnation of God. The other play in the cycle of seven is the flip side to The Rez Sisters. It is called Dry Lips Oughta Move to Kapuskasing and is about 7 men, the husbands, sons, brothers, and brother-in laws to the Rez sisters, and the female incarnation of the trickster: Re- the female incarnation of God. The third one in the cycle is a musical called, Rose, involving the 7 women from The Rez Sisters and the 7 men from Dry Lips.

In Rose, the script comes down to the male/female split. The whole issue boils down to abuse and a war zone, so that the male and female side of the psyche start to battle each other.

Note: *Prior to making the following comment, Highway was discussing the women characters in the musical, Rose, and feminism within Native communities. In between readings of the new script, Highway commented on the importance and suffering of Native women since the arrival of the whiteman. He also briefly mentioned the murder of Helen Betty Osborne who attended Guy Hill Residential School in Northern Manitoba and whom he knew personally.*

Native women have suffered gravely since the arrival of the whiteman. They have had the whiteman's garbage (everything from screw drivers to broken bottles) shoved up their cunts for over 150 years.

Question from the Audience: ***Is there a reason why you write so explicitly?***

I grew up on a reserve in Northern Manitoba. Contact with white people has been extremely recent. Until I was six , I had a very beautiful life. Then a culture shock happened when I was taken from my home for school. We have lived through a lot of violence and a lot of us died... We lived through a lot of shit just to get where we are. And we've seen that kind of ugliness, and we've seen people get shot. From two feet away on a Saturday night, I saw a bullet go through the head of my older brother. When you live through that kind of trauma, you have two methods by which to survive : A) I could kill myself, or B) I can write it out of my system. So, I just scream it out. I chose not to kill myself. And that is my life. If you choose to write about your life in a perfect world, that's your choice. My choice is to write about my life. I've been through hell and high water, and that's my method of survival. There is also a whole generation of us who were sent to those boarding schools that you read about, I am one of those people. All of us, with no exception, were molested by the clergy.

APPENDIX III - TOMSON HIGHWAY PRESENTATION, University of Calgary, February 23, 1993

Note: *The following information is a selection of Highway statements transcribed from a public presentation which included a reading from the play, Dry Lips Oughta Move to Kapuskasing. These collection of statements have been categorized in accordance to his subject matter.*

Biographical Information

I spoke nothing but Cree until I was six years old. I am mostly a full-blooded Cree Indian with maybe 1/64th Irish somewhere. I was born in Brockett, Manitoba with the sound of the thundering caribou in my heart. My parents spoke three Native languages: Inuit, Cree, and Dene. I speak three languages: French, Cree, and English. I went to boarding school in The Pas, Manitoba for 9 years. I then went on to University and received two degrees: one in English, and one in Music. I was also a concert pianist for a while; then I worked for seven years in the social work field.

In 1971, Betty Osborne was raped in The Pas, Manitoba. Betty Osborne attended the same residential school as me. I knew her. Her rape had a profound effect on all us. She was raped by four guys with a screwdriver. On December 6, 1989, 14 women were killed at a University in Quebec. I have witnessed violence and rape against women all my life and it has therefore become a thematic and symbolic aspect of my work.

I wrote parts of *Dry Lips* while sitting at my father's death bed. When I was struggling with the play, my father said, "you'll find a way." I fell asleep on his bed and dreamed of a young man, who couldn't talk, watching a hockey game at an arena. In my dream, the young man gets excited when a brawl breaks out; he has an epileptic seizure. This dream is what gave me the idea for the scene in which Dicki-Bird has a breakdown during the hockey game.

One afternoon, I went to a bar in Thompson, Manitoba. I sat close to the stage and watched the men watch strippers. It was like watching 17 men having a spiritual orgasmic experience at the same time. From this observation, I developed the Trickster / Stripper scene in *Dry Lips*.

I feel that Native people need to confront what is happening in some of our communities and on the streets. I have seen Native women in Thompson, Manitoba partying their faces off at 9 months pregnant. I once watched a women's water break in the bar as the juke box played, "*It wasn't God who made Honky Tonk Angels*. " The woman was so drunk that she didn't even realize what was happening. These memories are very vivid and haunting.

On Language...

English is not an emotional or sentimental language. When I want to love, I speak French. When I want to laugh, I speak Cree. When I want to make money, I speak English.

As a playwright, I take advantage of the interplay between the two languages. I almost always work in two languages. I use Cree nicknames, for instance, which fit into the central hue and establish the dream context in *Dry Lips*: Keechigeesik means "great sky or heaven" in Cree, and Wasaychigan means "window" in Ojibwe.

From a linguistic perspective, male / female neuter hierarchy is absent in Native language and the universe is not divided into male and female gender pronouns. Males and females are linguistically

and therefore culturally equal. Instead of gender, Native pronouns distinguish between animate and inanimate objects. Thus the Native language contemplates and distinguishes between the living and non-living world. Rocks, for example, are animate as they experience metamorphosis.

By forbidding Native people to speak Native languages, the Catholic authorities were able to effectively attack the value system of the people: restructuring the language provides an opportunity to restructure the philosophical world view of the people.

I like to share the essence of Native humour which to me is belly jerking humour.

On Aesthetics...

Theatre, music, and visual arts are art forms that can go beyond cultural and gender barriers; they are universal languages of the soul.

My creative writing process is not rational; it's more magical.

In my work, I strive to eradicate stereotypes. I feel that the Native community has had its soul stolen by the process of christianization. I look and work towards the return of the Native soul to the Native community.

On the productions of his plays...

Dry Lips has never been produced west of Manitoba because of the controversial content. A lot of professional companies do not want to take the risk of adding such a controversial and sensitive Native play into the seasonal repertoire. To me, a play which produces controversy is good. It means that it has provoked a reaction in the audience, and people are talking about it, which is ultimately good for the playwright.

On Mythology...

In *Dry Lips*, I have explored and combined Cree, Christian, and Classical Greek mythology. Classical Greek mythology predates Christianity and is empowered by both male and female Gods. Christianity is dominated by a male God, and Cree is a earth-bound, female-based spirituality.

In Christianity, the closest thing to a female God is the virgin Mary, and she has a 'dysfunctional ' womb.

In Greek mythology, Hera and Zeus's relationship is significant in influencing the relationships touched on within my work. For example, Zeus is always choosing to fool around, and Hera is forever finding out. Hera's rages are strong enough to cause natural disasters. In *Dry Lips*, Zachary is caught with his pants down and is terrified to go home.

On Symbolism and Theme in *Dry Lips*...

Simon continues to receive visions / premonitions of a young shaman being born on the reserve with strong shamanistic abilities . This rock vision involves a baby crying his name from inside the rock. Then an eagle lands beside him. This eagle has three faces of three women. Simon interprets the dream and sees his grandmother and women trying to hear the drum again. The rock breaks and a human being comes out. The scene changes from the vision to the unholy birth scene where we eventually see Dicki-Bird being born on top of a juke box in the bar as a fetal alcohol syndrome child.

Catholicism is a male based religion where a male God resides over the earth. In Native spirituality, which is earth based, God is more female as represented by Mother Earth. Therefore, in *Dry Lips*, we have God as a woman (Native spirituality) versus God as a man (Christianity). The confrontation

between the two religions occurs in the dream world within the play and is symbolic for the confrontation of religions which has occurred within Native people who have been forced into Christianity. Although not all Native people today have directly experienced Christianization, I feel the remnants of this battle is innate within the subconscious minds of all Native people.

In *The Rez Sisters*, the trickster is a type of male reincarnation of God. The male God is not as substantial as the female God. Therefore, in *Dry Lips*, the female version of the trickster represents the reincarnation of God as a woman. The female trickster is a much more prominent character in the play. This is because the female God has suffered more throughout history and within Native culture. It is about the return of God as a woman and the male response to her return.